FALL PREVIEW GUIDE

Computer Games

90+ GAMES COVERED

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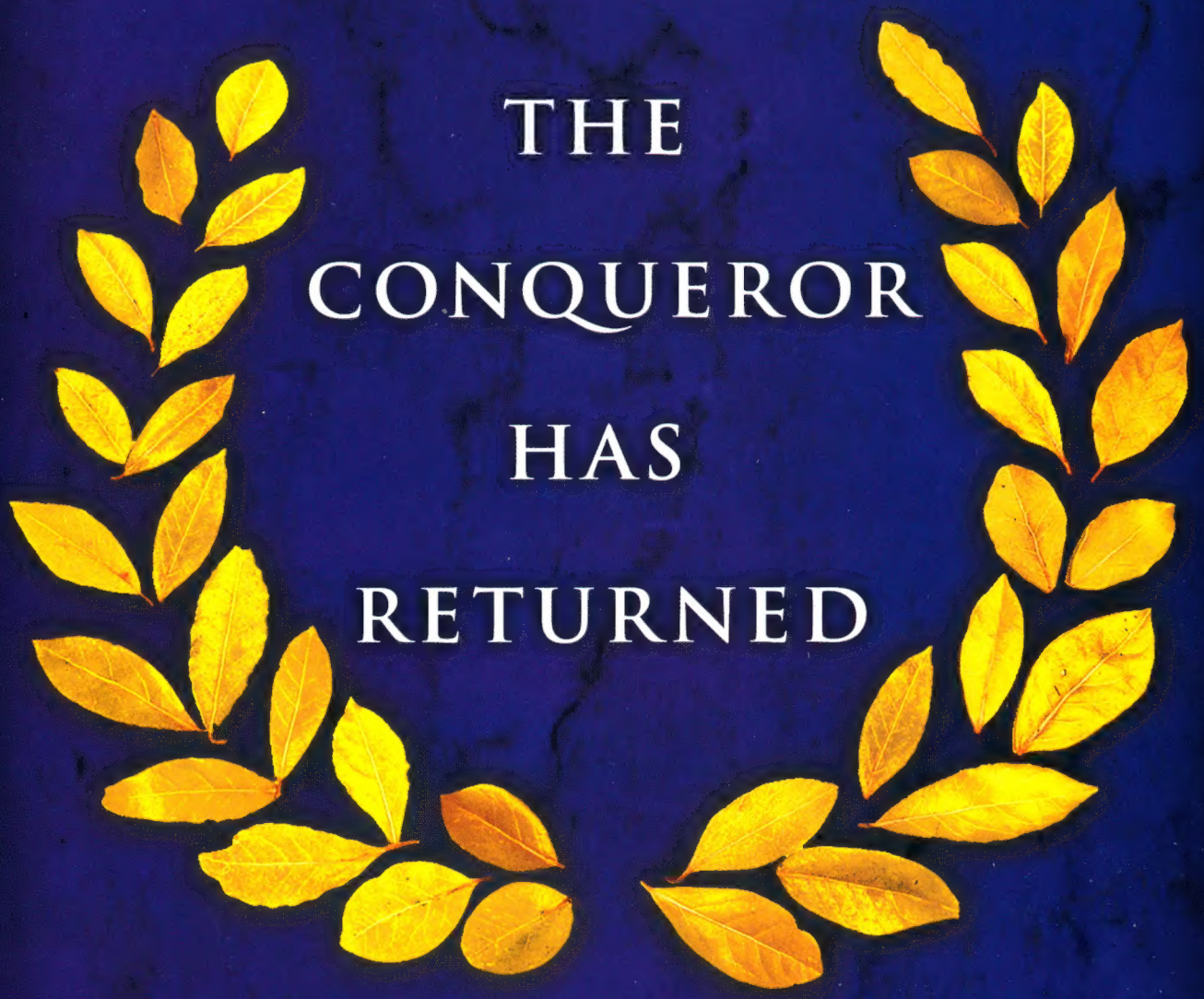
Dark Messiah of Might and Magic

OCTOBER 2006 | ISSUE 190 | www.cgonline.com



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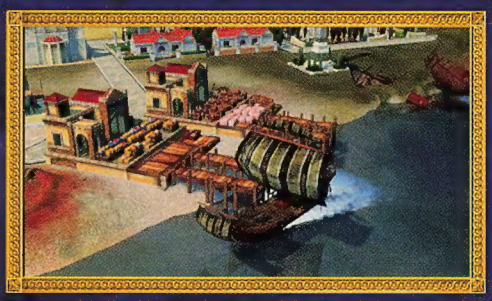

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(ACTUAL GAME SCREEN SHOT)

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PREY™

95 out of 100 – Game Informer
"PC and Console Game of the Month"

9.0 out of 10 – IGN
"An excellent, deep first-person shooter experience"

4.75 out of 5 – GamePro
"Surpasses all expectations to become one of the best games of the year"

9.0 out of 10 – Official Xbox Magazine
"Consistently impressive and rousingly fun in a way that you just shouldn't miss"

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Partial Nudity
Strong Language

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demo disk

War: It's Good for Gaming

Go to war with this month's demo CD. First up is *Faces of War*, a WWII real-time strategy game from the people that brought you *Soldiers: Heroes of WWII*. There are also two old-school wargames. The first is a demo of *For Liberty*; also on the CD is the full version of its predecessor, *1848*. If you want to fight wars in space, try *Spaceport: Galactic Empires*, and if you just want to fight dead people, watch the trailer for the DVD release of the movie version of *Silent Hill*. There's also the usual assortment of quality wallpapers from the nice chaps at gamewallpapers.com.

INSTRUCTIONS The disc should autoplay once placed in your CD-ROM. If it does not, double-click on CGCD.EXE to launch the interface. If you have a defective CD-ROM, a replacement can be obtained by sending the original to: Computer Games, ATTN: CD Replacement, 65 Millet St. Richmond, VT 05477.

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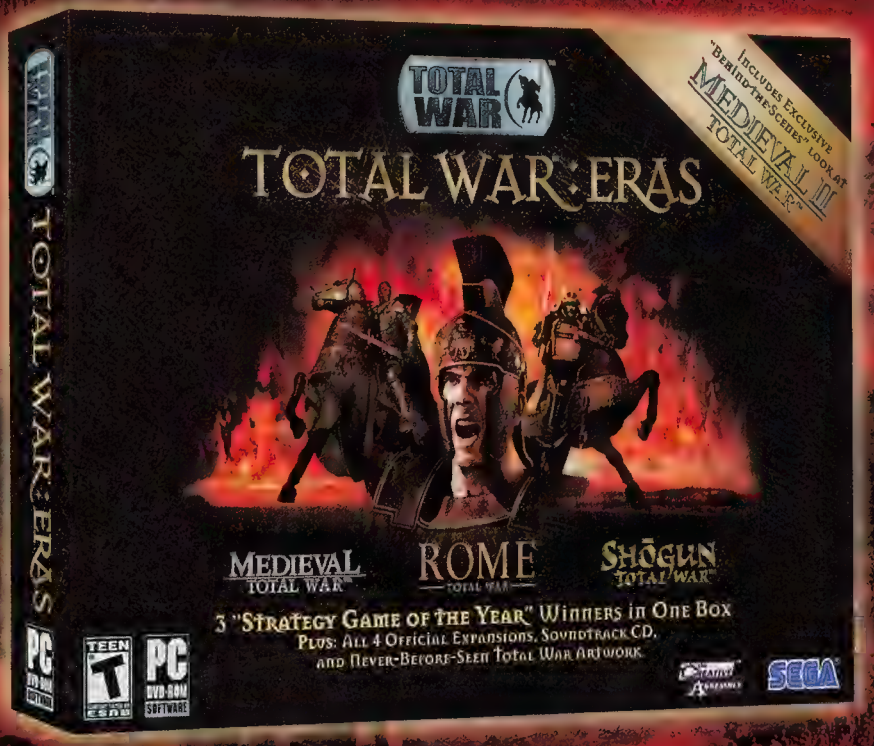
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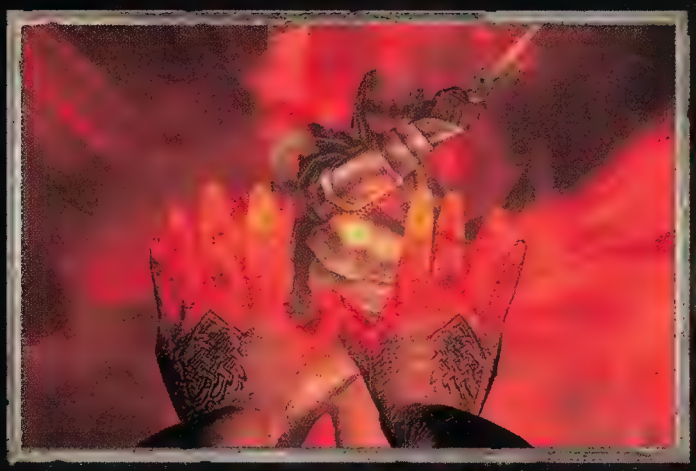

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by Steve Bauman

"The collective offers greater truth with less bias than the individual."

Everyone Is Wrong

Gamers and the industry are turning to metascores to determine quality. Since when does anyone trust the masses to get anything right?

GameRankings.com and Metacritic.com are amazing websites. Both compile reviews from various critics and publications—Web and print—and magically turn them into a single number that represents a "critical consensus," as Metacritic calls it.

If you're looking to spend $50 on a game, having easy access to multiple viewpoints is a very good thing. But there's a point of diminishing returns. What are you supposed to do with 100 reviews? Or thousands? How many reviews do you need to read before you get a good idea of what a game offers and whether or not it will match your tastes?

When faced with so many opinions, you're practically forced to look at the average alone, the metascore. So what does it mean? By itself, very little. It needs context, and the text provides it for the individual ratings; the formula used by the sites to calculate the final metascore handles the collective one. So, to truly understand a game's metascore, you need to read each individual review and know the algorithm the website uses to generate its final number. Without that information, the score is fun to talk about but kind of meaningless.

And that's the problem. These numbers aren't treated as if they're fun and meaningless. They've become the grand universal truth about quality.

To a lot of people, the collective offers greater truth with less bias than the individual. These people say they'll only purchase games that get over a certain percentage score at GameRankings. They also work at game companies and write contracts that base royalty payments on achieving certain ratings at Metacritic.

People are even applying this kind of numeric criticism to other forms of art, ones with a more analytical bent. Metacritic has a book section. Holy crap, John Updike's new novel got a 44! Philip Roth's got an 80! The latest *Harry Potter* book got a 77! (Do those scores take into account the number of pages and the quality of typography?)

It's nuts. And it's part of a larger trend of turning over as much decision making as possible to math. Amazon analyzes the buying patterns of everyone on its site in order to recommend items to you. Google has some magic formula to measure a website's relevance by considering how many other sites view it as relevant. Sites like Digg rely on users and formulas to determine whether or not certain news stories are important.

Everyone seems to say the same thing: The collective offers greater truth with less bias than the individual.

When you combine this idea with the notion that quality can somehow be distilled by a formula into a meaningful number, you have to wonder, why do we need text reviews at all? Why shouldn't we trust those algorithms? Almost everything in a game is one. Math will save us from crappy reviews. Is it too "out there" to think that we could eventually feed a bunch of data into some algorithm and a score would pop out, one that told you everything you needed to know about the product being "reviewed"? The masses will rate that rating, which will cause it to jump up and down like a kid on a caffeine bender. The truth will emerge, though, because the collective offers greater truth with less bias than the individual.

Hold on. Step back. Don't most of us make fun of the masses? They have terrible taste. They listen to awful music, see terrible movies, and buy crappy games. If you get too much input on something, it's called "designed by committee." That's generally a bad thing.

Yet here we are, willingly turning over the final verdict on quality not to friends, colleagues, or respected critics—in other words, individuals—but to the masses. Should we put great faith in these numbers when we're fully aware that the "consensus" view can be just as stupid and "wrong" as one from any random individual?

Collective wisdom has its place, but we can't forget about or dismiss individuals. Both are critical to evaluating and understanding these games we enjoy, and neither can be wholly trusted. ■

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Our friend Joe Zabinski wrote in this month with a simple statement: "You should do reviews of tabletop role-playing games." So, what do you think of this idea? Do people read the boardgame coverage we do? (We know Bart Bunscheen does, since he wrote in saying that boardgames led him to PC games in the first place.) Are enough readers interested in these kinds of games to justify an expansion of the section? Let us know at editor@cgonline.com.

Kudos for 188

I've never written in to a magazine before but wanted to give you props for issue 188. I read it cover to cover and found myself engaged, entertained, and interested the whole time. From the talented Kelly Wand's article about *World of WarCraft* (which was awesome, especially the sidebars) to the intellectual commentaries on *Grand Theft Auto* to Kelly again on the way gamers aren't defending themselves very well, the whole thing was just great.

You guys also have lots of hilarious sidebars. The *Oblivion*-bashing one was hilarious. Keep up the good work! **–John Messinger**

"The First Amendment is just a red herring here where children are concerned."

Grand Theft Kids

In their Applied Game Theory column in issue 188, Jenkins and Squire state that "every major political debate gets fought over the bodies of children, but rarely are children's own perspectives taken into account."

Like, duh. That's because they're children. Does a state legislature need to interview children about their ideas on video pornography before making it illegal to sell it to them? No.

There is no "free speech" component here, period. There is no chance that violent videogames are going to be banned outright. The First Amendment is just a red herring here where children are concerned. Game publishers know that a lot of their sales come from "kids with money," and they're just worried about losing those sales. Too bad.

I'm a parent. When I want to let my child play a game, I buy it for him. The First Amendment does not exist to protect his "right" to go to the store and buy it himself without my supervision, nor does the videogame industry need to lobby on my behalf so that I can be a lazy parent and make him go buy it himself without my supervision.

A minor can't even buy a can of spray paint at Wal-Mart, for crying out loud. The First Amendment doesn't mean children can buy whatever they want. **–Starfist**

While publishers are afraid of losing money, making the connection between games and pornography is… unfortunate. And unless you're arguing that games aren't expression, it most certainly is a First Amendment issue. –ed

The Big Bounce

I have two words (and one parameter) to say to Tom Chick in reference to his Three Finger Salute column in issue 188: player.setlevel 10.

Seriously, dude, lose the 360; you'll be glad you did. You just haven't lived until you've played a fifth level Orc with a huge axe and 240 strength. Goodbye painful self-esteem problems! **–Geoff**

Futuristic Sex Robotz

Thank you very much for mentioning us and our album on page 39 of issue 188. Unfortunately, lyrics were badly misquoted, and our album is titled "Hotel Coral Essex," not "Hotel Canal Essex." Additionally, the quoted song is titled "WoW," not "World of WarCraft." Finally, we prefer the group be referred to as just "Futuristic Sex Robotz," rather than "The Futuristic Sex Robotz."

Again, thank you very much for the exposure; however, I'm concerned by the prospect of inaccuracies becoming permanent record, especially at a time when such mentions will be integral to our inclusion in Wikipedia. I would appreciate printed corrections. **–Coaxke**

Consider those corrections printed. And we regret the errors. –ed

Irish Pizza

The Irish flag pic that was used on page 40 in issue 188 features the wrong colors. An Irish flag is, from left to right, green, white, and orange, not green, white, and red. That's the Italian flag. **–Kenneth R. Freels**

We'd hoped we could blame a printing glitch, but it was just a screw-up. –ed

Errata

In our Phantasy Star Online preview in the July/August issue, we reported that the game is expected to ship for the PlayStation 3. It will appear only on the PC, PS2, and Xbox 360 platforms. We also incorrectly cited the developer of this title as Sonic Star instead of Sonic Team.

We regret the errors.

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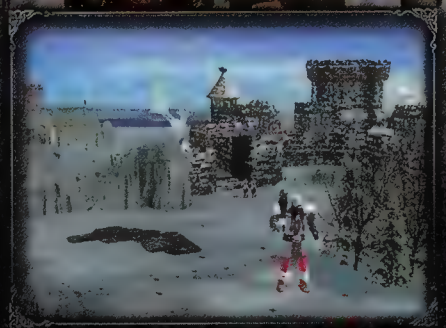
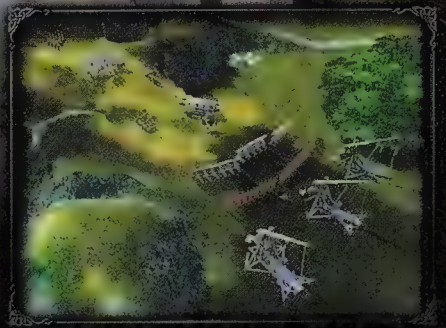
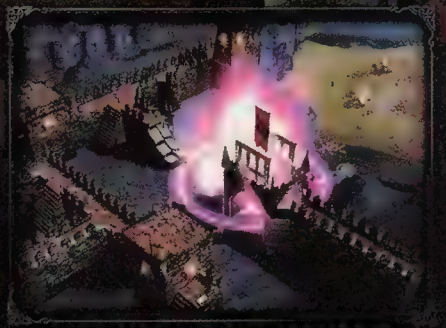


26 missions over 3 unique campaigns all with advanced AI, give the best ever single player Stronghold experience



100% more siege equipment and castle traps - werewolf launchers, stake hurlers, tunnel systems, dragon harpoons



Brand new 4-player multiplayer features, including a challenging skirmish mode Deathmatch and "King of the Hill"

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SPEAKOUT MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

From Noob to Sixty

By Elisa Romero

My boyfriend pressured me into trying *World of WarCraft*. I had watched him play it all the way from the beta through the official release and beyond, and I was sure I didn't want to touch it with a 10-foot pole. I get lost trying to find my car in the grocery store parking lot, yet he seemed to think I would have no problem navigating the two massive fantasy online continents, and all the cities and forests in between.

At first, I couldn't even make my toon walk without crashing her into a tree. The keyboard controls were foreign and confusing, and the first time a wolf attacked me, I just stood there bleeding. By the time I found the attack button, my poor Human Warrior was dead, pwned by a level two beastie.

"My gaming experience had been limited to The Sims, and if I forgot to hit a button in that game, the trash compacter didn't come alive and eat me."

Yet my boyfriend insisted that I try again.

I made an Undead Priestess and he made an Undead Rogue. It was easy to follow him around while I looked at the pretty scenery. When we hit level 15, we entered a mine and got attacked by three mobs at once. My boyfriend screamed, "Heal me, heal me!" and I screamed back, "I'm trying, I'm trying!" while banging keys because, as I said, I wasn't paying attention, and I didn't quite get what I was supposed to be doing.

Not only had I never played *World of WarCraft* before, I had never played any MMO before. My gaming experience had been limited to *The Sims*, and if I forgot to hit a button in that game, the trash compacter didn't come alive and eat me.

After the third time in a row that the werewolf-thingies in the mine ate us, I looked over at my boyfriend, who was banging his forehead on the keys of his computer, and my cheeks went hot red.

I realized that, if I didn't want him yelling at me in the office, I had two choices: either give up and stop playing, or really take the time to go in on my own and figure this game out.

While my boyfriend was at work, I went online and created a Human Warlock, a morbid-looking sort of lady with Goth-white skin and dark hair. I only made a Warlock because I had seen some of those big, blue, floating pets around other players and thought it would be cool to have one.

Then something amazing happened. I was only a level three Warlock when, much to my horror, I got mobbed on a quest by three bad guys at once. For the other toons I had made, this usually meant instant death. I slapped a spell called Immolate on all three and watched them run around burning and screaming while my imp shot flaming balls of fire at their collapsing bodies. Watching them die, I started to cackle. The instant gratification and intense feeling of satisfaction I got when I looted the three dead guys made me fall in love with a game.

Between laundry and dishes, I spent every minute on my lock, getting flight paths and rising higher and higher in the ranks. Not only did I learn how to navigate both continents, I also learned how to slaughter everything in between. I even learned to read and understand STFU, LMAO, and WTF abbreviations while ignoring "KAN Sm1 GIVE ME GLD PLZ!!!!"

Somehow, while I soared over the snowy mountains around Ironforge or swam the murky depths of the sea on the shores of the Swamp of Sorrows, somewhere between killing Undead in the Plaguelands and earning rep with Argent Dawn, I blinked and I was level 60.

My level 60 Warlock now gets put in the number one group in our 40-person Molten Core raids. Our guild master put me in this group, right along with the main tank and main healer… the main healer being an amazing Night Elf Priest who just happens also to be the epic outfitted main toon of my boyfriend.

Best of all, nowadays when I look over at my boyfriend in our office as the final boss goes down, he is looking back at me and smiling. Maybe I'm imagining it, but he seems a little proud.

Do you have something to say? So say it! Send all topics and/or completed articles of no more than 800 words to editor@cgonline.com. Articles may be edited for space, or because we want to justify our existence by chopping your piece into little bits.

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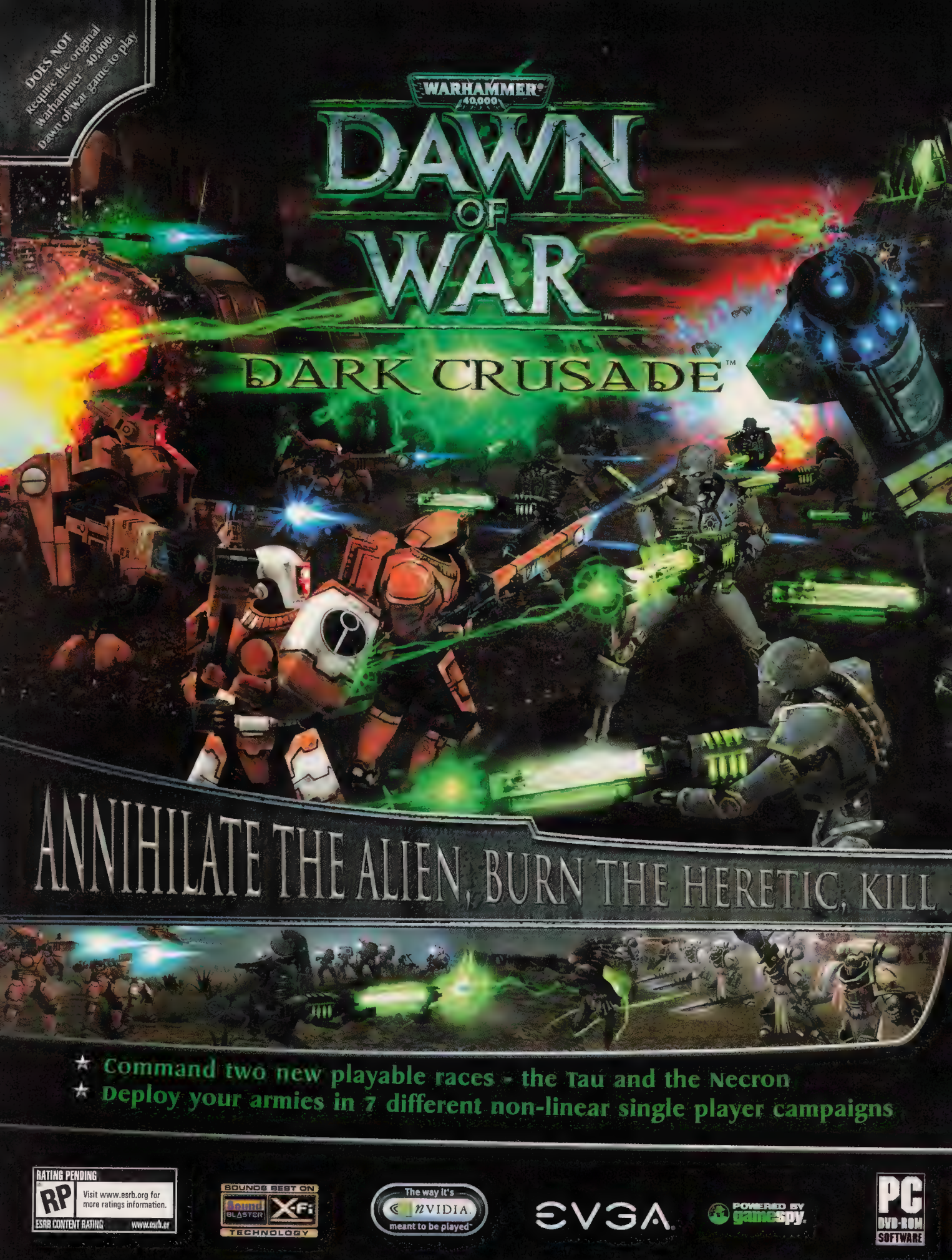
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Great Lessons of History

In the first of a possibly continuing series, we look at what games teach us about the past. First up, Titan Quest BY MATTHEW GALLANT

The dawn of civilization is shrouded in mysteries, the kind that only Leonard Nimoy seems qualified to discuss at length. *Titan Quest* does an admirable job of illuminating them, though, especially when you consider that its primary purpose is to be an action/role-playing game and not a history lesson. Here are some of the things you'll learn about Ancient Greece, Egypt, and China from *Titan Quest*:

"Most problems requiring heroic intervention in ancient times could be traced back to demons or beastmen in a nearby cave."

The ancient gods were sometimes mean to people, but they created the land in such a way that a lot of the time, no matter where you went, you were generally going downhill, with guaranteed scenic vistas on the way. The gods were so powerful that Greece stayed mostly unflooded, even though *Titan Quest*'s starting location of a small harbor and its subsequent downhill adventures suggest that the entire island was, in ancient times, below sea level.

People (or sometimes centaurs) that needed you to do something for them were definitely not interested in helping you in any way until they had aired their specific grievances. In fact, if a pack of giant boars came from nowhere in the middle of the problem's backstory, the supplicant would just keep on telling you who did what to him and the direction of the cave they ran off to (most popular direction of ancient times: "nearby"). Meanwhile, it was up to you to keep paying attention while handling the somewhat more pressing issue of rampaging pork.

In fact, once you got to the heart of the matter, most problems requiring heroic intervention in ancient times could be traced back to demons or beastmen conducting nefarious activities out of a base of operations in a nearby cave. This is the true reason why the Trojan War was so famous—no caves involved. It was quite a novelty.

Every human settlement, from village to metropolis, had a dude in it who would give a fervent spoken word performance about a different hero or god. It was pretty much the same as how there's always one dude, no matter where you go in Dallas, who won't shut up about the Mavericks. Except in ancient times the dudes would at least start by telling you that their personality defect was being forced on them by an invisible water nymph goddess called a Muse.

Greek men were the ones always asking, "Does this archon's chiton make me look fat?" Or they would have been, if it wasn't so obvious that yes, it was. It was a price they were willing to pay for the comfort— and lightning-resist bonus— of such a short skirt.

We expect things we find today from Ancient Egypt to be in pieces, but the truth is that most of that stuff was pre-wrecked back in the day. The Egyptians had their particular brand of tourist appeal planned out from the start. If the pharaoh didn't like the way a statue was turning out, the priests would just take it off to the side, tip it over a little, and plant bushes and stuff around it to give it that authentic "been like that a long time" feel.

"In Egypt, zombies had the fine motor skills to be archers if they wanted to. And lots of them wanted to. Mummies too."

You'd think the dry climate in Egypt would make the zombies of that region even more stiff and lurching than we're used to seeing them in their usual habitats of shopping malls and laboratories. But no. In Egypt, zombies had a pliable enough upper body musculature, not to mention the fine motor skills, to be archers if they wanted to. And lots of them wanted to. Mummies too. The skeletons seemed to be OK with these inroads being made on their traditional weapon roles; no evidence of debate on a "Defense of Traditional Undead Archery Act" can be found in any of the hieroglyphic tomb frescoes.

The Great Wall of China is the largest construction in the world. Even more amazing than that— and the fact that it was built so long ago— is that it was originally built on top of an impassable mountain range above the tree line. Sometime later, the Chinese realized that arrangement was really quite redundant (especially considering the Mongolians the wall was meant to stymie were well known for using the non-mountain climbing breeds of horses), and it was rebuilt on the more moderately craggy plains where it exists today. ■

Age of Sales

A look at the innards and design philosophies of Ensemble Studios

BY MATTHEW GALLANT

Bruce Shelley is a casual gamer. So he says. It seems like an odd statement from a founder of ICE, the company that published the Middle-earth role-playing game in the '80s. Nobody would believe, after looking at the board for Avalon Hill's *Titan*, that somebody who worked on that mass of multicolored hexes and squares considered himself a casual gamer. It sounds more than a little funny to hear the words coming out of the mouth of the guy who co-designed many of the games that made Sid Meier *Sid Meier*.

But, as Shelley talks about Ensemble Studios and its games at a steady pace for over an hour, it becomes clear that he just means he's not into dark, slimy, and bloody themes. "The sun always shines in an *Age* game," he says. It's one of the viewpoints on game design that's brought Ensemble to the top two floors of an attractive 15-story office building in uptown Dallas. The company's success is on the verge of forcing it to relocate to an even bigger locale.

Shelley ascribes the same "casual" background to his University of Virginia boardgaming buddy, studio head Tony Goodman, and he believes it paved the way to success. "Most places, the guys running things are programmers or artists," he explains. "Tony is a successful businessman who decided that he wanted to run a successful gaming studio."

As development of the *Age of Empires III* expansion pack *The War Chiefs* comes to a close, the studio finds itself in a two-week crunch period. "We ask people to come in from 10:00 to 10:00," says Shelley. "We cater lunch and dinner." Such a light cracking of the whip and absence of pizza delivery may in part reflect Goodman's origins outside a game development culture. But, as Shelley provides a tour of the studio, he cites several examples of the deeper reason.

"Tony's committed to providing a top-quality work environment," Shelley says, as he walks past large bookshelves filled with history books, uniform guides, and National Geographic videos used for reference by the designers, artists, and animators. Across

"What we do is design by playing. We try to get a playable build within six months and then just iterate off of that."
–Bruce Shelley

[left to right] Concept art hanging in the hallway shows paper dolls of units at each upgrade level. The blue shows the portions of their uniforms that will be recolored with the team's color; Team members monitor the progress of a multiplayer match-up taking place in the test lab; Music and Sound Director Stephen Rippy runs a clean studio.

from the library is a room with a raised platform covered with a gymnasium mat. "We have models in about once a month for the artists to do some live sketching," Shelley goes on. Further down, the hall opens into a room with a bank of TVs arranged in a rectangle on the wall, six of them active as a group conducts multiplayer battles. "Today's their first day," Shelley says. "We held an *Age III* tournament and brought the six best players here for a couple of weeks to give us some feedback on the expansion."

The hallways, trimmed with long, gray, horizontal panels, lead from the TV room to the spacious cafeteria and game room, then back to the office lobby. The circuitous layout of the offices and their look are inspired by *Star Trek*. You can see it best in the arches connecting the hallways, which would be straight out of *The Next Generation* were it not for the lack of doors. "Tony flew the architect out to Las Vegas to see [*Star Trek: The Experience*]," Shelley says. "He wanted this to be a cool place to work. Well, cool for game developers."

And it is, apparently. Music and sound director Stephen Rippy says he wouldn't work anywhere else. And he hasn't—he's been with the company since doing intern work on *Age I* while he was at the University of Texas.

"We do a lot of crazy stuff," Rippy says. "We went to Gettysburg to see a re-enactment. A lot of the rifle and cannon fire you hear in *Age III* was recorded live there." Ensemble has grown to over 100 employees, including *War Chiefs* lead designer Sandy Petersen and two other employees (Graeme Devine and Paul Jaquays) poached from id Software over in the eastern suburbs of the city. Petersen leads 40 Ensemble employees who are working full-time on *The War Chiefs*, with the rest contributing but focusing on the still top-secret massively multiplayer project or "other incubator projects."

In contrast to Shelley's measured and practiced delivery, Sandy Petersen's speech style is fast and all over the place. But he's got a lot to talk about right now. "We wanted to add a big bucket of stuff," he says. Petersen quickly moves from feature to feature, starting with how they're making the native civilizations—the Iroquois, the Sioux, and the Aztecs—markedly different from the Europeans, but also from one another. From there he jumps around to different topics: spy units, the war chief unit's design, updates to the explorer unit, new cards, and the bonfire (native civs can assign as many as 25 villagers to dance around it and switch between bonuses in one of three areas: unit production speed, experience trickle, or unit combat ability). Petersen spends a minute discussing the new Revolution ability given to European civs, which turns all their villagers into militia and cuts them off from their home city in exchange for a boost to the military. Then it's back to the Aztecs ("The Aztecs don't have gunpowder or horses") and some talk about things they've found out through the play-testing process. Petersen relaxes only over lunch.

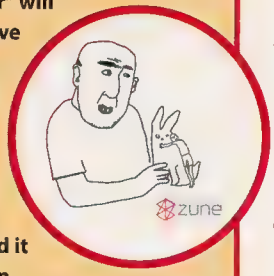
"What we do is design by playing," says Shelley. "For a major release, we try to get a playable build within six months and then just iterate off of that." Every week different portions of the team do a play-testing session, and there's a monthly design meeting that mulls over the feedback from those. Artist Mark Sinclair adds that, in addition to gameplay, art design gets tweaked in these sessions; they were very helpful in the process of giving the Native American buildings in *War Chiefs* an authentic architecture, while keeping them unique and recognizable at a glance.

"It's not a design-by-committee type of affair, though," says Shelley. Ultimately, the project leads make all calls, but the team's input is a great barometer. "*Age III* was difficult—we pushed it to be really different and we ended up with something that didn't feel like an *Age* game," he says. "We had to bring it back. There were long, long meetings—whole company meetings—over a single feature. We had a victory point system: Complete a certain objective and your team scores a point, first to 10 wins; and we massaged that feature for months, went through several iterations. We got to a point where half the company liked it and half the company didn't. We decided that was too risky and we pulled it out."

Ensemble's methods work. Shelley notes that the *Age* series has sold over 16 million units worldwide, and that *Age of Empires II* is the third best-selling PC game of all time. ■

NEWSBYTES

iTunes Gets Left Behind—Or vice versa. *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* will include an interface icon that will launch the iTunes music store, letting you buy music from within the game. It will also support customized iTunes soundtracks. Left Behind Games CEO Troy Lyndon told NextGen.biz that it's a step toward actual "interactive advertising" as opposed to "interruptive ads." Doesn't that make everyone all tingly? Why Not Call It iZune?—Microsoft announced its new portable entertainment brand, Zune. The company's purported "iPod killer" will include a hard drive and Wi-Fi support and will use features from Xbox Live. It's supposedly a music player first, video player second, and it remains to be seen whether it'll be the "portable Xbox" people have been predicting for the last couple of years.... Vivendi Accountants Say "WoW"—The game division of Vivendi showed a 24% increase in revenue in the first half of the year, mostly thanks to *World of WarCraft*.... IT AM MAD—That's one of many amusing anagrams you can come up with for the newly merged AMD and ATI. The $5.4 billion deal is seen as a way for AMD to compete with Intel by delivering a complete computer solution: CPU, motherboard, and video. This is



Continued on page 30

Small Civilizations

There may have been a low turnout, but the first Apolycon successfully brought Civilization fans together

Almost a year in the planning, the first official convention of the *Civilization* community Apolyton.net was held in Timonium, Maryland on the weekend of July 7-8, 2006. Attendees came from as far away as Greece and the Netherlands and as close as Baltimore. But not as many as had been hoped.

"I'm a little disappointed in the turnout," lead organizer Dan Quick admitted as he surveyed the room of about 20 diehard *Civilization* fans. He chalked up the low registration levels to last-minute uncertainty over the cost and location, uncertainty that almost scuttled the entire convention. But, in spite of the numbers, he considered the convention an acorn from which a larger and more regular convention could grow.

Apolyton's members got to meet Brian Reynolds and Sid Meier, and played Rise of Legends and Civilization IV against against members of the design teams in the comfort of the corporate offices.

Those who did come had the privilege of rubbing shoulders with designers and producers from Firaxis and Big Huge Games. "You can't cater to the hardcore audience when you design your game," said Barry Caudill of Firaxis Games. "These guys are your evangelists. It's a privilege to give a weekend to these guys."

Besides getting the chance to meet Brian Reynolds and Sid Meier, Apolyton's members played *Rise of Legends* and *Civilization IV* against one another and members of the design teams in the comfort of the corporate offices. *Civ IV* designer Soren Johnson's early elimination from his own game's tournament caused some comment, but was testimony to the skill of the true fanatic.

The official convention program included autograph and Q&A sessions with Reynolds, Meier, and Johnson, formal presentations from developers and scenario designers, and Apolyton-led presentations on *FreeCiv* and the *Diplomacy* variant of *Civ IV* multiplayer.

The small number of registrants meant that each and every attendee had a chance to get up close and personal, making this gaming con much more intimate than most based on best-selling games. And the industry pros involved seemed equally pleased by the familiarity of the event. "I'm always amazed by the enthusiasm surrounding *Civ*," said Meier. "These are the people you make the games for. Without them, my job wouldn't be possible."

–Troy S. Goodfellow

QUOTABLES

"Sure, the PSP was beautiful, shining, pretty, and posh, whereas the DS was definitely the ugly sister. But hey, the ugly sister is better in the sack."

–Jeff Minter

"We've seen what happens to those sorts of movies, and the world would be a better place if nine-tenths of those projects had never happened."

–Gabe Newell, on why Valve isn't in a rush to sign away the movie rights to *Half-Life*.

Your Name Is Awful

Marketing serves at least one purpose: to save the world from games with names like these. Or maybe it creates them. Who knows? What we do know is that these game names pretty much suck.

One Word Too Many: Abomination, Pariah
If you're going to go for that direct, one-word name, make it a good word, one that won't also serve as a potential one-word review.

Colons Gone Crazy:
Dominion: Storm Over Gift 3
The colon is the worst thing to happen to game names since Roman numerals. This is but one example of the horrible trend. What does anything after the colon add to the name?

Foreign Legions:
Anito, Dofus, GROM, Konung
These must sound better in their native tongues, right? In English, they either sound dumb or like a noise you make when choking on phlegm.

Twice as Nice: Divine Divinity, Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne
These come direct from the Department of Redundancy Department. Why give your game one name when repeating it will make it twice as memorable?

Say What?
Huygen's Disclosure, The Saga of Ryzom
They may have been the most descriptive names ever, but both just make you scratch your head. Do they sound mysterious, and/or fantastical? Who knows? Who cares?

Bad Names That Kind of Work:
Big Mutha Truckers, Will Rock, Wargasm
These are all terrible but at least give you some indication of what to expect. The last one spawned a multiplayer mode called "Multiple Wargasm," which admittedly is pretty funny.

Worst Name Ever:
The Varghina Incident
Honestly, it's not even close. Though there's no record this game ever shipped, it was in development at one point in Brazil. The name has something to do with aliens. We hope.

DESERT ISLAND DISCS

Trapped on a desert island? *Civilization IV* could keep me busy for an eternity, but it's not going to tell me how to get ahead in navigation, make a voodoo doll, fight in a gigantic stone monkey-mech, or master insult... er, swordfighting.

So, I hope I'm not being too ironic, but the games I'd need are the *Monkey Island* series. Not only are they funny, but they're educational.

Parts 1-3 are some of the greatest games ever made. Some other games may be more open-ended or have higher replayability, but all cultures—especially the most primitive ones, like, say, island-dwelling cannibals—communicate best through storytelling. The *Monkey Island* games are so wonderful and magical, they're the only ones I'd need to rebuild my life as a banana-picking, cave-dwelling crazy hermit.

–Emily Blood

Send your own lists and comments to editor@cgonline.com

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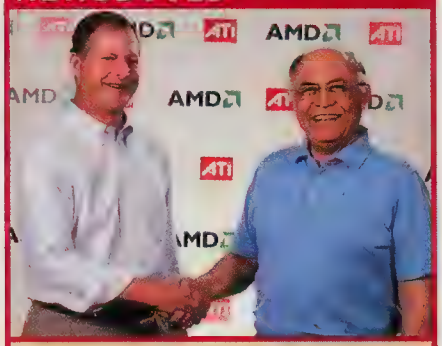
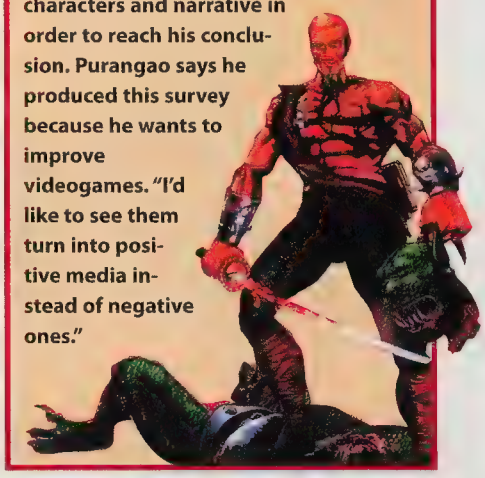


video. This is particularly important for laptops. Fans of Athlon and Radeon products may want to "TEAR HAND LOON" or something.... CCP Cards Players—*EVE Online* developer CCP Games is launching a collectible card game called *EVE: The Second Genesis*. It will be available with two starter kits, "The Great War" and "The Day of Darkness." Booster packs will be available (of course), and buyers have a 50% chance of finding "premium" cards in each pack. No word on whether the CCG from CCP (ouch) will have a lot of mining.... Games Found Racist; Gamers Call Researcher Names—University of British Columbia researcher Robert Purangao completed a report on racism in videogames in which he says negative portrayals of minority groups are widespread. He used four games spanning two decades—*Kung Fu*, *WarCraft III*, *Shadow Warrior*, and *Grand Theft Auto III*—and spent over 100 hours with each analyzing the characters and narrative in order to reach his conclusion. Purangao says he produced this survey because he wants to improve videogames. "I'd like to see them turn into positive media instead of negative ones."



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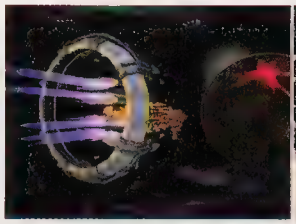
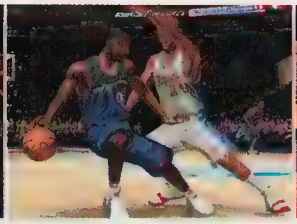
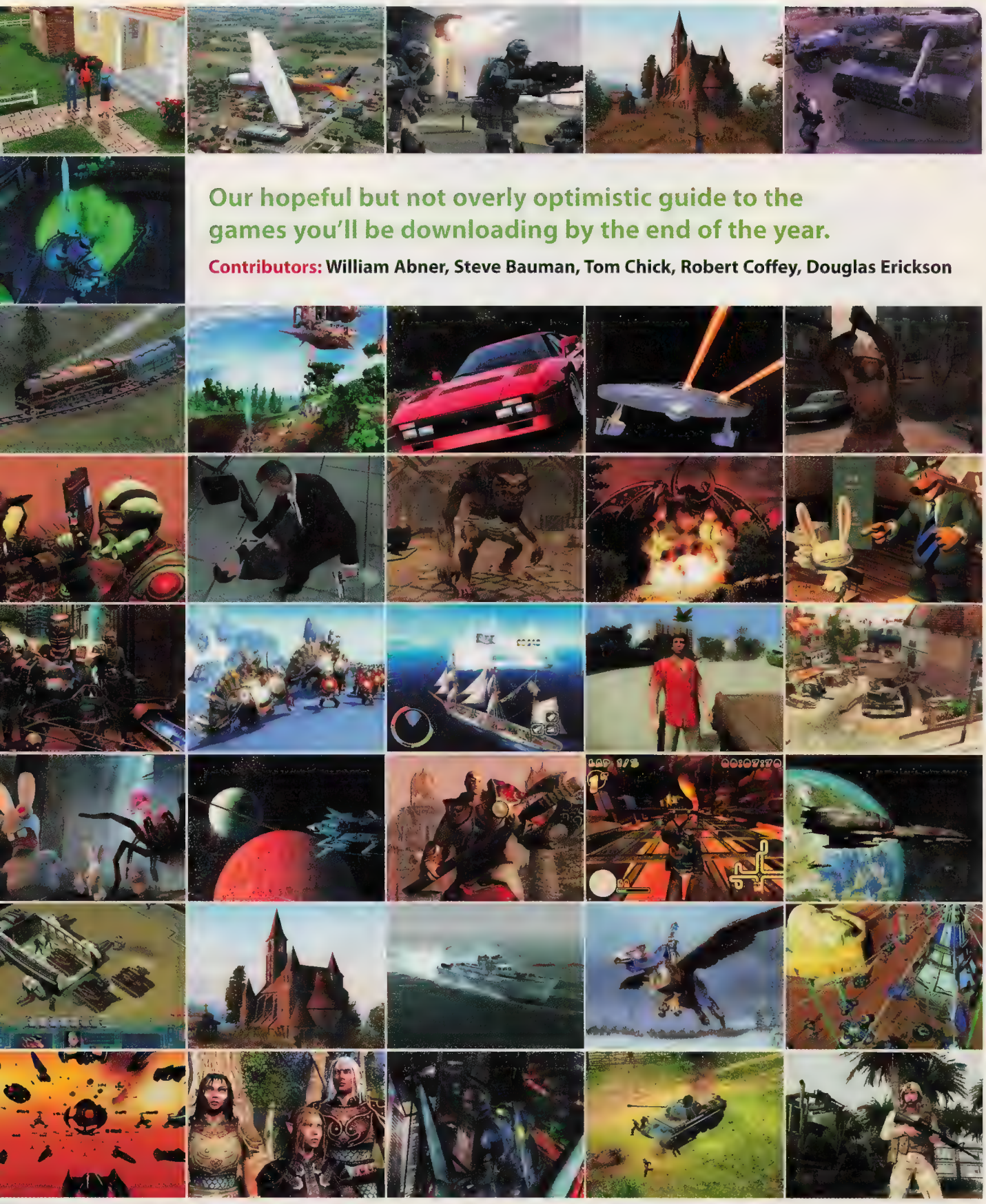





Our hopeful but not overly optimistic guide to the games you'll be downloading by the end of the year.

Contributors: William Abner, Steve Bauman, Tom Chick, Robert Coffey, Douglas Erickson

THE LIST

Some of these games will actually ship in 2006

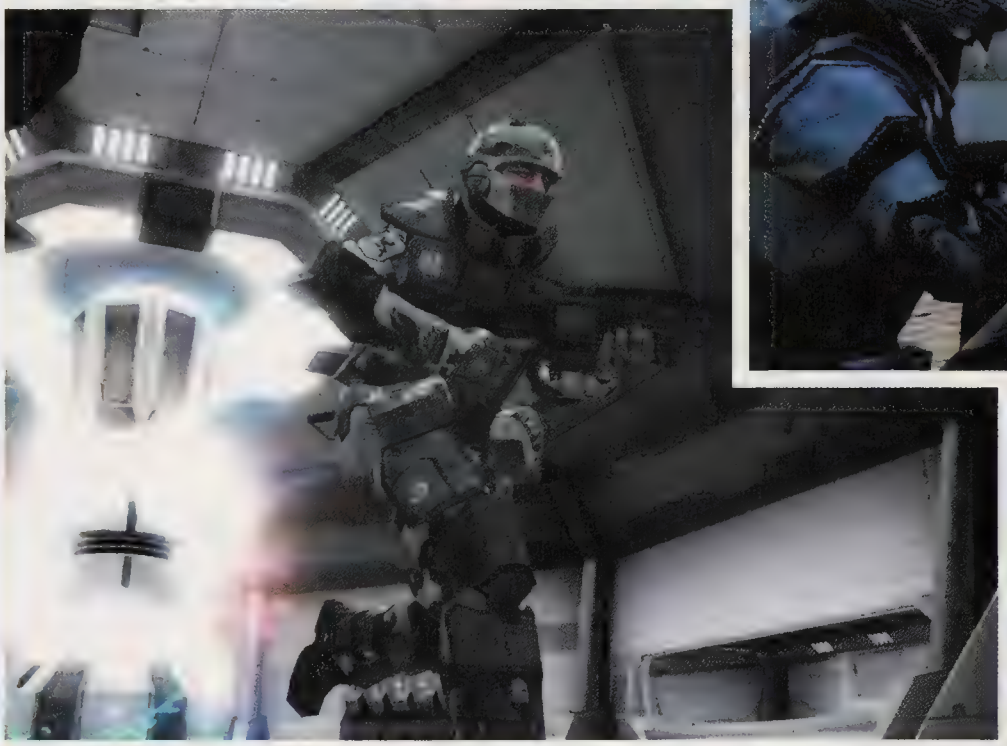
Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales This is the game formerly known as *Sea Dogs II*, and it's sort of the sequel to *Pirates of the Caribbean*, which itself was a sequel to the

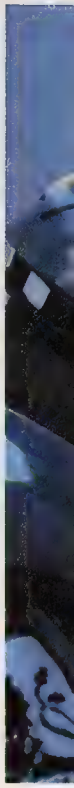
original *Sea Dogs*. Got that? Take to the seas as the pirate Blaze or his sister Beatrice. Get a crew, set sail, and score some booty. (Akella/Atari)

Air Assault Task Force The designers of *BCT Commander* and *Armored Task Force* do that complexity thing they do so well. (ProSim/Shrapnel Games)

Anno 1701 This series is "big in Germany," as they say. The third edition has you exploring new islands and starting cities in the age of exploration. According to its developer, it was developed with "fan wishes and suggestions" in mind. Yikes. (Sunflowers)

Armed Assault The developer of *Operation Flashpoint* finally returns to the front with an all-new semisequel. It's set in modern times, on an island split between a Soviet-armed dictatorship and a U.S.-allied democratic nation. Pick your sides, take on large, open-ended missions, and switch between different members of your team. (Bohemia Interactive)





ARCHLORD Sure, MMOs are a dime a dozen. Sure, most Korean MMOs (*Lineage*, *RF Online*) haven't translated that well. Sure, *ArchLord* is a Korean MMO, so it faces a slightly uphill battle. Set in the world of Chantra, it has eight playable classes distributed among three races. It has a large, expansive world. It has quests, it has crafting, it slices, it dices.

But it does have a twist. A mighty interesting twist, in fact. One particular chain of quests can lead to one player being named ArchLord of the server. You can't solo your way to the head of the class, however; you'll need a powerful guild to siege castles and defeat bosses. At that point, it's a PvP showdown with two other potential lords. The ArchLord gets a flying mount and can have an impact on the game world by altering the weather and economy (e.g., raise and lower taxes, with kickbacks going to your guild). Your reign lasts 21 days, at which point the battles start anew. (NHN Corporation/Codemasters)

Battlefield 2142

Developer DICE **Publisher** Electronic Arts

The Word For all of their niggling flaws, the *Battlefield* games have generally delivered superb action and gameplay. When you consider that this one is like *Battlefield 2*, only with giant robots… seriously, who's not already there?

This sci-fi edition will feature the traditional conquest mode with up to 64 players, but there's a notable new "Titan mode." Each team will have a Titan, a massive flying aircraft carrier command ship. This ship is the backbone of each side's forces, serving as a base and location for respawns. It must survive. The key to victory, therefore, is destroying the enemy's Titan before they can destroy yours. Though it sounds simple enough, blasting away at a massive floating ship won't take it down. Instead, you'll have to lead an assault, fight your way to the core of the beast, plant charges, and then get away clean.

There are plenty of additional new features, including more customization and role-playing. But it's hard not to think, "Another *Battlefield*? Already?" Still, giant robots!

THE FANBOY SAYS Yo, that Battlefield formula still works. Also, giant robots!

THE CYNIC SAYS Dude, that Battlefield formula is getting stale, and the bugs… the bugs!

Bad Day L.A. It's trying so hard—you have to give it that much. *Bad Day L.A.* is a third-person action game where you play a homeless guy taking on zombies, earthquakes, terrorists, and god knows

what other "edgy," hot-button issues of the day. The mainstream press thinks it's saying something; the game press here thinks it's saying, "Buy me." (Enlight)

Bang! Howdy The creators of the fun-loving and cute *YoHoHo! Puzzle Pirates* take on the mighty Western with this tactical combat MMO. (Think "West-COM.") Now that they've tackled pirates and cowboys, rumor has it the next game from this developer will feature ninjas. And zombies. Maybe even zombie ninjas. (Three Rings)

Battlefront The first of many World War II games on this list. Only here we have an actual wargame, covering battalion-level engagements like Saipan, Market Garden, Novorossisk, and Gazala. Ambitious? Sure. Too ambitious? Maybe… except there's that whole "Developed by SSG" part. Those guys know what they're doing. (Strategic Studies Group/Matrix Games)

Battlestations: Midway This can't work, right? The developer of *Nexus: The Jupiter Incident* takes its outer-space expertise to World War II for this Windows and Xbox 360 release. Yes, a cross-platform, historical 3D action/strategy wargame. Weird. (Mithis Games/Eidos)

THE LIST (continued)

Bionicle Heroes More blocky toys come to life in this third-person action game from the developer of *Lego Star Wars*. Yay for toy licenses. (Traveller's Tales/Eidos)

Broken Sword: The Angel of Death Not to be confused with *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*, the fourth game in this adventure series finds our intrepid hero

George Stobbart saving the world again. Is he ready to make the ultimate sacrifice? Who knows? (Revolution Software/THQ)

Caesar IV The fourth Rome city builder of 2006 is probably the most anticipated. Most of the team at developer Tilted Mill worked at Impressions, which created the original *Caesar* games, and the core gameplay of this fourth iteration remains the same: You build and manage the Roman city of your dreams. You create trade networks, fight off the occasional invasion, and keep everyone happy and working. And there's a pretty good chance that plebs are still needed. (Tilted Mill/Vivendi Universal Games)

CALL OF JUAREZ A semi-crazy preacher with a violent past, a young ne'er-do-well with no name (OK, one name), and a singularly misnamed border town called Hope. Like something from the imagination of a Sergio Leone wannabe, *Call of Juarez* packs in about as many spaghetti Western clichés as you can think of. Think *Deadwood* with less potty-mouth and *Unforgiven* with less, um, meaning.

The hook here is that you play both as Billy, a roguish young man who ran away from an abusive stepfather to seek his fortune, and Ray, a half-mad preacher man with a penchant for toting a revolver in one hand and the Good Book in the other. You get revolvers, whips, fists, and the rest of the Western toy chest, plus the ability to fan-fire your Colt or drop into a sort of "bullet time" mode. You can quote Scripture, too, and call down the wrath of the Lord, though truthfully Sam Colt seems to make a better shepherd in this valley of the shadow of death.

It's probably not going to be another *Outlaws*, but at least it has the right attitude. And after all, that counts for a lot… dagnabbit. (Techland/Ubisoft)

Company of Heroes

Developer Relic Entertainment **Publisher** THQ

The Word From looking at screenshots, you might get the idea that *Company of Heroes* is Just Another WWII Game. From the level of detail and the close-in view, you might even figure it's a shooter. But it's not. It's a real-time strategy game very much in the tradition of Relic's *Dawn of War*.

Company of Heroes uses the basic concept of squad management from *Dawn of War*, in which you managed units in groups, giving them a destination and maybe a target. The individual squad members took it from there. The difference is that *Company of Heroes* features more meticulous tactical detail for things like cover, suppression, line of sight, and where exactly each guy is going to stand. The gameplay feels much closer to that of the *Close Combat* series. You don't worry about which side of the wall your soldier should hide behind. That's his job.

Another important feature is destructible terrain, something that's been sadly out of fashion in the post-*X-COM* era of carefully crafted visuals that can only blow up according to scripting. But Relic intends something entirely dynamic here. A tank can blow a hole in a wall, suddenly making that gate you were guarding not so much of a strategic chokepoint. The building that was protecting your squad might offer a lot less protection after a satchel charge or an artillery strike. The ebb and flow of any given battle is no longer in the hands of the guy who designed the map, because everything he's put there is temporary.

A map is divided into regions, each with a capture point that gives you control if your men hold it long enough. A controlled region can give you an income of munitions (which you use over time as you fight), manpower (which you use to recruit infantry), and fuel (which you use for vehicles). In order to use resources from a region, however, you'll need to maintain a line of contiguous regions back to your headquarters. A quick overhead map shows you the supply lines. If you can't take a heavily defended position, just isolate it.

As in *Dawn of War*, the gameplay is focused on infantry, with vehicles that shift the balance of power when they arrive. There are different classes of soldiers, including engineers who can build defensive structures, snipers who are effective at long range against other infantry, and antitank teams with bazookas or Panzerfausts. You earn experience as you fight, which lets you choose command powers from a tree that includes special capabilities like bombing runs, artillery strikes, and paratroopers. These supply the sort of dramatic reversals that are especially important in multiplayer games (featuring teams of up to four players).

After the unique twist Relic managed to give "Just Another WWII Game" with *The Outfit* for the Xbox 360, the subject matter of *Company of Heroes* can be as generic as Relic wants to make it. Show up for the gameplay.

THE FANBOY SAYS Yo, *X-COM's* destructible terrain, *Dawn of War's* squad management, *Close Combat's* individual soldier AI, and Relic's latest graphics engine. Not a bad start.

THE CYNIC SAYS Dude c'mon, you can't really blow up the whole map, can you?

THE LIST (continued)

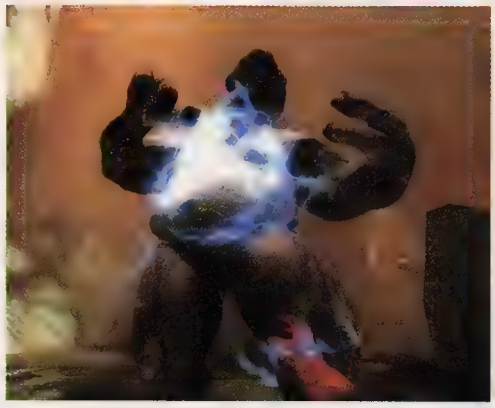
Desperate Housewives: The Game It's a TV show, it's a DVD, it's a fragrance, it's a clothing line, it's a ringtone, it's a cookbook. Now it's a *Sims*-style

videogame. You take on the role of a new housewife who moves into Wisteria Lane and unlocks the delicious scandals hidden in your seemingly "perfect" neighborhood. (Liquid Entertainment/Buena Vista)

Devil May Cry 3: Special Edition Tapping into our inner LiveJournal-posting goth, the PC version of this console series will also let you play as Vergil, Dante's equally angst-filled friend. (Capcom/Ubisoft)

DUNGEON RUNNERS Talk about a visual homage; at a glance, this looks exactly like *World of WarCraft*. The gameplay, however, is closer to *Diablo*. A limited version will be available at no cost from NCSoft, and you can pay for additional features. It's all randomized, it's very fast-paced, and it's designed to usher you through the world with less busywork (and running across endless landscapes) than you find in your average MMO.

Like *Diablo*, *Dungeon Runners* is for solo players or those in smaller groups. While hub areas are fixed in layout, every combat area—or instance, if you're using MMO terminology here—is randomized. And it's all about loot, with the dropping of tons of randomized items. Death penalties are nonexistent, you can warp back and forth between towns and the surrounding areas, and it's extremely simple to play. Click, click, die. Repeat. And there's that whole "free" thing to remember. (NCSoft)



Dark Messiah of Might and Magic

Developer Arkane Studios **Publisher** Ubisoft

The Word *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* isn't an open-ended role-playing game like *Oblivion*. It doesn't have a sprawling gameworld, ginormous character skill ladders, or vexing moral decisions. But there are more choices to make in this game than in your average first-person action game. Such as: "Do I shrink this Orc and grind him under my heel, or should I give him a good kick and impale him on that nail-studded board over there?" Those are the kinds of choices most first-person shooter fans can get behind.

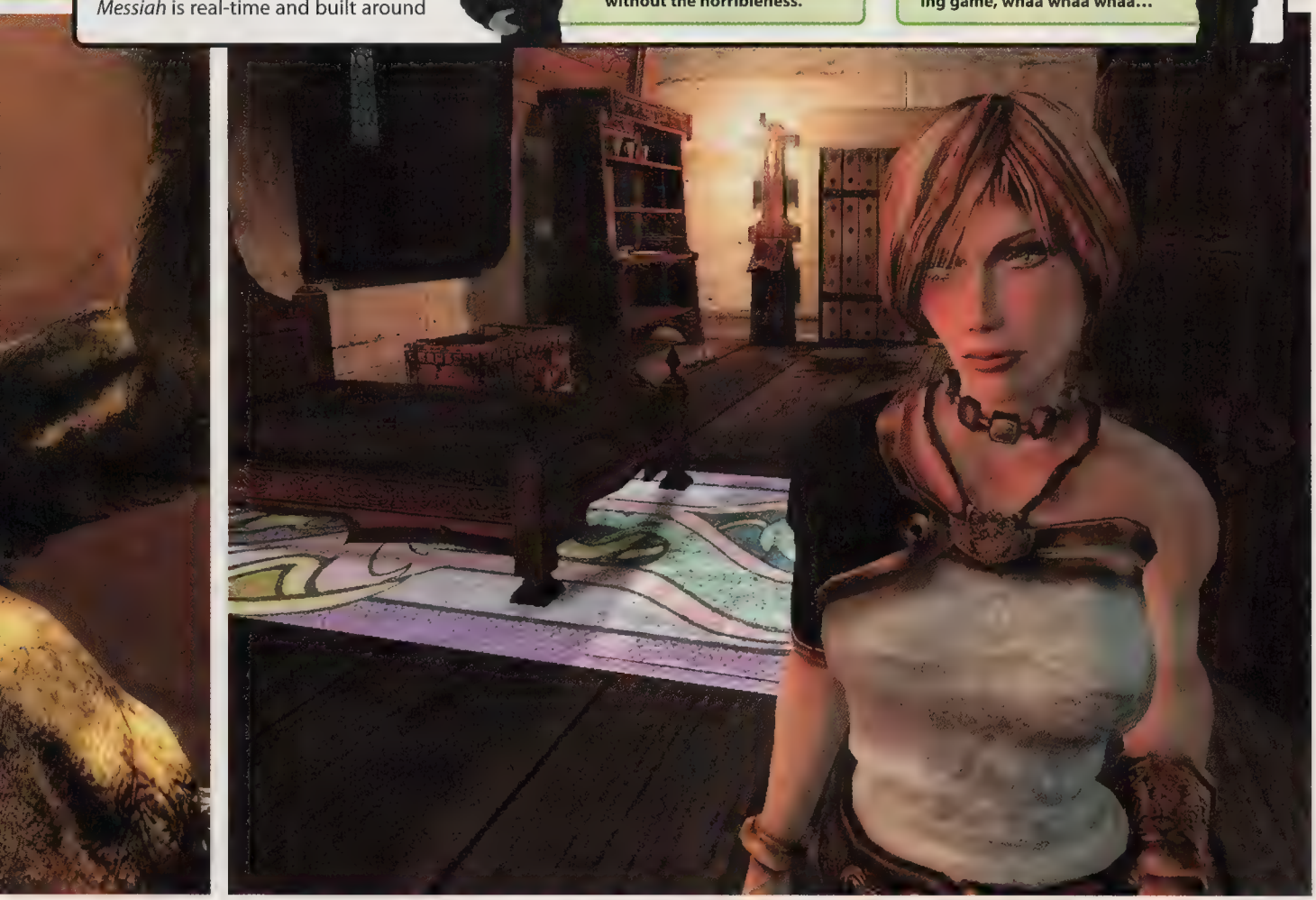
And *Dark Messiah* is an FPS first and foremost, though your gun is generally a bow and arrow or a fireball spell. In contrast to the turn-based *Might and Magic* RPGs of yore, all the action in *Dark Messiah* is real-time and built around classic shooter conventions, including jumping puzzles, pitched battles in cramped quarters, and boss fights. Still, it retains some of the RPG elements of the earlier games, chiefly in the form of three different skill trees that will allow you to develop the titular potential savior's abilities throughout the game. There are no classes per se, so you'll never be locked into a specific skill set; instead, every time you level up you'll pick a new skill from one of three skill trees, one each for magic, stealth, and combat abilities.

To accommodate that freedom of play, all the game environments are being built (courtesy of Valve's Source engine) as potential pieces of your arsenal. Sure, you can chop up an Orc with your sword, but you can also hack out a beam to drop a rafter full of crates on his skull, kick him into that aforementioned plank o' spikes, use telekinesis to hurl flaming barrels at him, or destroy the shaky platform he's standing on by sniping out a support rope with an arrow.

As a first-person shooter, *Dark Messiah* will have the constitutionally mandated multiplayer action, accommodating up to 32 players in three different game modes. Of the three game types, the Battlefield-style Crusade mode is the most interesting, since it allows you to level your avatar during the matches. It's all part of a very ambitious package, and, when all is said and done, Ubisoft may just turn out to be a better caretaker of the *Might and Magic* brand than creator New World Computing proved itself to be.

THE FANBOY SAYS Yo, it's like *Legends of Might and Magic* without the horribleness.

THE CYNIC SAYS Dude, this isn't a real *Might and Magic* role-playing game, whaa whaa whaa...



THE LIST (continued)

Eragon Christopher Paolini's best-selling fantasy novel comes to the big screen, your PC, and your consoles. The developer worked on the *Two Towers* action/RPG for Electronic Arts, and this is remarkably similar. (Stormfront/Vivendi)

Exteel Who doesn't want to fight as giant robots with and against up to 16 people? Think *Virtual-On…line*. Like *Dungeon Runners*,

this will be free to play, with premium items costing players real money. (NCSoft)

Faces of War The developer of *Soldiers: Heroes of World War II* returns with another WWII real-time strategy game. Take your American, English, Russian, or German squads through various missions and campaigns. You can also put yourself in battle and control a single soldier in third-person combat. (Best Way/Ubisoft)

LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy

Developer Traveller's Tales **Publisher** LucasArts

The Word This comic take on *Star Wars Episodes IV*, *V*, and *VI* can bring a smile to the face of even the most jaded gamer. It has more than 50 playable characters, which you can mix and match in LEGO fashion as you play through the original trilogy. Who doesn't want to control Darth 3PO?

It's a true cooperative game, requiring you to switch between characters in order to complete its blocky levels. (Unfortunately, the PC version doesn't include multiplayer. But, aside from the PSP one, none of other versions do either.) There are vehicles and mounts, a new "Free Play" mode that lets you wander around and create trouble, and more puzzles than a Sudoku book. The PC keyboard controls are, at least in the default configuration, a wee bit byzantine; it needs a gamepad.

Look, there's no rational reason to be this excited about what is essentially a kids' game. Yeah, it's easy. It's colorful. It has simple graphics but brilliant art direction. It's also one of the coolest games of the year. Seriously.

THE FANBOY SAYS Yo, it's the original *Star Wars*! In LEGO!

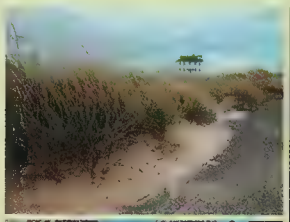
THE CYNIC SAYS Dude, it's mostly a console game, so the PC version isn't quite as refined. Still… it's the original *Star Wars*! In LEGO!

EVIDENCE: THE LAST RITUAL

Missing: Since January is one of the best adventure games in recent years. A slightly unsettling game involving a kidnapped woman and a serial killer named the Phoenix, it was one of the few video-based adventure games that worked. Its main drawback was a reliance on making you do your detective work via Google, which led you to as many walkthroughs for the game as solutions.

The Phoenix is back in *Evidence*, the sequel. Another woman has been kidnapped, and it's up to you to piece together the clues to rescue her. These will come from articles in actual, as-yet-unnamed French and American newspapers. This new tactic should avoid the Web search problems found in *Missing*.

And if the game retains the *Se7en*-styled sense of dread that permeated *Missing*, it should be one ritual worth performing. (Lexis Numerique/Adventure Company)



GTR 2 If you're a fan of racing simulator *GTR*'s fanatical attention to detail, better look in your rear-view mirror. That blur you see is *GTR2*, which is hoping to overtake the original in every way. It has hundreds of licensed cars, representing every FIA GT and NGT car from such esteemed manufacturers as Ferrari, Porsche, and Lotus. It will offer 28 recreated licensed venues, including the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps.

The graphics look terrific, with full crash modeling, and a new feature called LiveTrack simulates the accumulation of track and tire debris on the surface of courses during a race. For new players, a driving school should help with the rather steep learning curve. (10tacle Studios/SimBin)

Flight Simulator X The new version of this venerable series is focused on missions. Microsoft is including more than 24,000. The

detailed landscapes cover continents, focusing on a select number of high-detail airports. (Microsoft Game Studios)

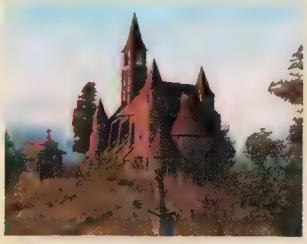
Forge of Freedom The developer of *Crown of Glory* turns that game's Napoleonic system into a Civil War game. Control is at the brigade level, and it has the usual features of games of that era (initiative, morale, supply lines). (Western Civilization Software/Matrix Games)

Galley Battles: From Salamis to Actium Play the English, Spanish, or Catalans in the Greek-Persian, Peloponnesian, First Punic, or Roman Civil Wars in this ancient naval game. Warning: You may see hexes. (Hyperborea Studios/ Shrapnel Games)

THE LIST (continued)

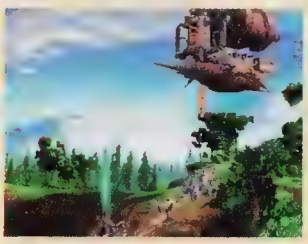
Gary Grigsby's World at War: A World Divided That's a lot of "Worlds" in one name. The legendary wargame designer's latest is a sequel to *World at War*. It's WWII, it's complex, and if you're a fan of this kind of thing, you already know you want it. (2by3 Games/Matrix Games)

The Guild II This sequel to *Europa 1400: The Guild* takes that game's complex, "Sim Middle Ages" gameplay and simplifies it a bit.



You start with a single character, pick a profession, and go mad. Create a business. Woo a mate. Make heirs. And then get medieval on your rivals. (4 Head Studios/Aspyr)

Heroes of Annihilated Empires How can you not be interested in a game with a name that sounds like it was generated by a random game name generator? How about a fantasy game with Elves fighting… modern jets and tanks?



And two main game modes, so you can play it as a real-time strategy game or something more like a *Diablo*-style RPG? Will it be any good? Who knows? But we definitely need more of this kind of crazy. (GSC/CDV)

Histwar: Les Grognards This wargame puts you in charge of a Napoleonic army, circa 1805–1814. It has 3D graphics, thousands of soldiers in battles (though they're controlled via regiments, brigades, and divisions), and a bunch of historical battles (Austerlitz, Wagram, Borodino, and more). (Jean-Michel Mathé/Battlefront.com)

Medieval 2: Total War

Developer Creative Assembly **Publisher** Sega

The Word Ever since *Shogun*, Creative Assembly has spent its time recreating epic battles in increasingly greater visual detail. It continues that trend with *Medieval 2: Total War*, its first sequel. Spanning the period between 1080 and 1530, the game opens with the Crusades and concludes in the celebrated age of colonial expansion and witch burning.

The turn-based part of the game features a new system for developing settlements, whereby you can foster them into either cities that furnish economic benefits or castles that muster fresh armies and confer defensive bonuses. Trade routes are handled as in *Rome*, although merchants can now acquire exotic commodities from far-flung lands, Marco Polo-style, that often wind up sending epic ripples through the global economy.

Battles will take place over an even wider swath of terrain, ranging from the Russian steppes to the Americas and southward to include parts of Africa. In order to cross the Atlantic, you'll need to unlock naval technology of sufficient complexity. At this point, you can expand your wealth by forming colonies to farm resources, or you can massacre swarms of Aztecs to help yourself to the gold filling their heathen treasure vaults. (Hopefully, it's not cursed Aztec gold.)

New factions will also be available, often posing unique challenges based on their starting location. Scotland and Portugal, for instance, both start as third-stringers hemmed-in by powerful neighbors that they'll need to play off one another immediately, whereas the Venetians begin marooned on an isolated peninsula sans any über-units at all.

Christianity and Buddhism yielded unique specialty warriors back in *Shogun*, but none of the religious denominations covered in *Medieval 2*—from Islam to paganism—can compete with the might or versatility afforded by hooking up with the Catholic Church. Short of getting your own guy elected, there's nothing like keeping a pope on your good side for getting tons of desirable economic and military benefits. But his aid can be a double-edged sword, as popes are finicky, needy, greedy, and apt to call on you for help in a crusade at the drop of a hat. There's always the option of simply ignoring the pope and taking the hit, which may make you fair game for other Catholic factions, but at least it gets you out of church-building detail, going off on crusades, and restraining yourself from attacking other nations the supreme pontiff annoyingly favored over you.

Wars. Angry Popes. Epic battles. Who doesn't want to "get medieval" again?

THE FANBOY SAYS Yo, when hasn't Creative Assembly delivered?

THE CYNIC SAYS Dude, get medieval? Again?

THE LIST (continued)

Infernal Who doesn't want to be an agent of hell who goes undercover on Earth to gather up some souls for the big guy while fighting against the "bad" guys from heaven? In a twist, you're actually a former "good" guy, but you were fired for being too "evil." Or something. (Metropolis/Playlogic)

Just Cause This open-ended action game puts you in the shoes of one Rico Rodriguez, who lands on the island of San Esperito with a thirst for missions. There's 250,000 acres of landscape to explore, you can hop in various vehicles, and you can play the island's factions—rebel forces, drug cartels, large furry animals—against one another. Could be great, could be a mess. Take your pick. (Avalanche/Eidos)

Knights of the Sky This WWI flight sim uses the *IL2 Sturmovik* engine and covers 1916-1918 on the Western Front. (Gennadich Team)

Left Behind: The Game Who doesn't want to drive the heathens from the Earth? This real-time strategy game, which pits the "kind of good people who weren't quite good enough to make it to heaven" versus the "extremely evil" is already controversial; hopefully, it'll actually be good. (Left Behind Games)

Sid Meier's Railroads!

Developer Firaxis **Publisher** 2K Games

The Word This game was covered in detail last issue, but in brief, this is another update of *Railroad Tycoon*, with many improvements. You're still a robber baron/captain of industry in the 19th century who makes money by laying track and connecting industries and cities together.

It's awfully cute, looking a lot like a toy train game. That's intentional, as it's designed to elicit the sort of feeling most kids have when they see model trains. Firaxis plans on including more visual cues, so buildings will show what they produce and cities will show what they demand.

The game remains mostly about laying track, optimizing routes, playing the stock market, putting people out of business, and watching the map grow because of your input. It's always been a bit hard to put a finger on why this is all so appealing, but that Sid Meier guy may have something to do with it.

THE FANBOY SAYS Yo, that Sid Meier guy has made a few good games.

THE CYNIC SAYS Dude, haven't we already played this game a million times?

JOINT TASK FORCE This modern/future real-time strategy game looks fantastic, graphically speaking. Created by many of the people who made the superb *Codename Panzers: Phase One*, it will include 20 missions set in fun spots like the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Balkans.

One of its interesting twists is the ability to manipulate the media and civilians via a news channel that's providing information about the battle. But mostly you'll be controlling small numbers of units that you want to keep alive as they gain experience in combat. Combined arms will be important, too. Despite the game's action-y appearance, the developer is promising a lot of realism and to that end has licensed various weapons, vehicles, and equipment from major hardware vendors. (HD Interactive/Most Wanted Entertainment/Sierra)

MAGE KNIGHT APOCALYPSE Based on a tabletop game similar to the popular *HeroClix* franchise, this *Diablo*-esque action/RPG looks sharp. Choose from five playable races and pick up additional party members as you play in either single-player or co-op multiplayer.

And there's a lot of combat, leading to lots of experience to spend on crafting your perfect character, plus lots of dropped loot, leading to lots of money-making opportunities. There are combo attacks using multiple party members, upgradeable weapons… oh, there's just so much stuff here. It's like an MMO, without the "massive" parts. You know, like *Diablo*. (InterServ/Namco)

WINTER KILLS

Unless they appear between December 21st and 31st, these "Winter" game releases will be out in 2007

Crysis
Unreal Tournament 2007
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes ····▶

Maelstrom This futuristic RTS comes from the developer of the offbeat and interesting *Perimeter*. As in that game, its big trick is deformable terrain, which allows you to terraform the landscape as you play. The setting is a future Earth where aliens are invading. (They never want to hang out and grab a beer.) The planet has seen better days, and water has become its most precious resource. The humans have split into two factions, giving you three different groups battling one another for control. (KD Vision/Codemasters)

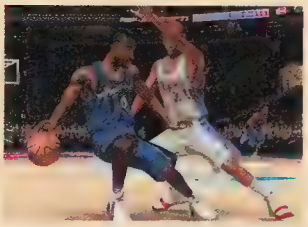
Magic: The Gathering Online 3.0 The latest version of the venerable collectible card game is scheduled to go live before you read this. New cards, new 3D rooms, a rewritten front end with a better interface… it's magic. (Wizards of the Coast)

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance It's all about the numbers with this new superhero game, as in the over 140 spandex-clad comic book characters that are featured here. You can choose from more than 20 playable heroes, including Spider-Man, Wolverine, Blade, and Captain America. This is a mission-based single-player game with a multiplayer co-op mode, with in-game stats that show who is the best swinger or grappler. (Raven/Activision)

THE LIST (continued)

Need for Speed Carbon The latest version of this yearly franchise builds on the city racing of *Most Wanted*. New to *Carbon* is canyon racing and your need to have an actual racing crew, while the normal city racing is expanded. It also features actress Emmanuelle Vaugier as your ex-girlfriend. (Electronic Arts)

NBA Live 07 Let's give some credit where credit's due: EA picked Dwayne Wade as last year's cover athlete, before he became DWAYNE WADE in this year's playoffs. That means something, right? This year, Tracy McGrady is the cover star. (EA Sports)



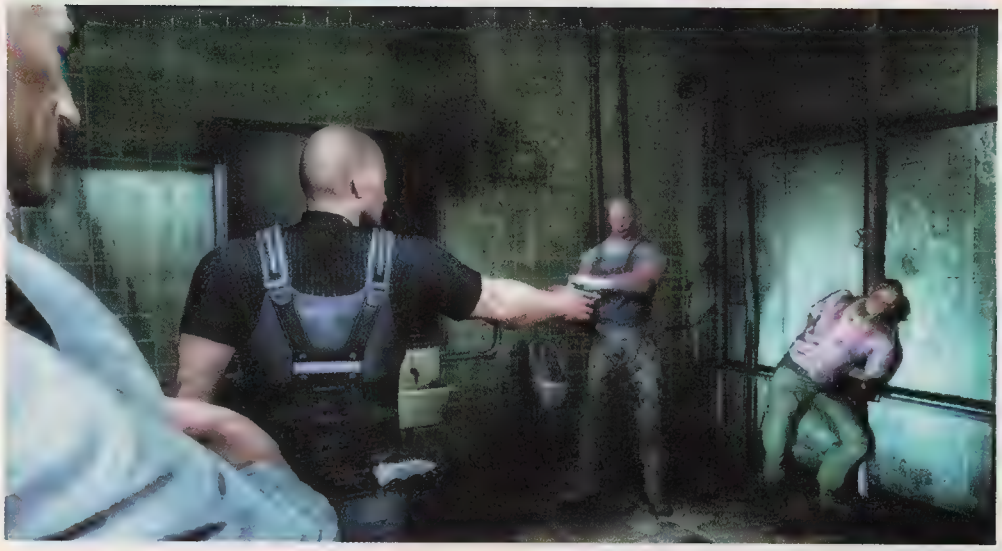
NHL 07 The big news this year is that rookie Washington Capitals left-winger Alexander Ovechkin is on the box. There're probably some gameplay improvements as well. (EA Sports)

Origin of the Species So, the military, it likes to experiment on bugs. But it's also incompetent, so said bugs mutate. At this point, a teenage girl has to run around rescuing her friends. Hilarity—and third-person action—ensues. (Nu Generation/Tri Synergy)

REPEAT OFFENDERS

When we were putting together this list last year, the companies said these games would be out in the fall. Apparently we forgot to ask, "Which year?"

Age of Pirates
Anarchy Online: Lost Eden
Saga of Ryzom: Ryzom Ring
Swashbucklers: Blue & Gray
TimeShift
WarFront: Turning Point
You Are Empty

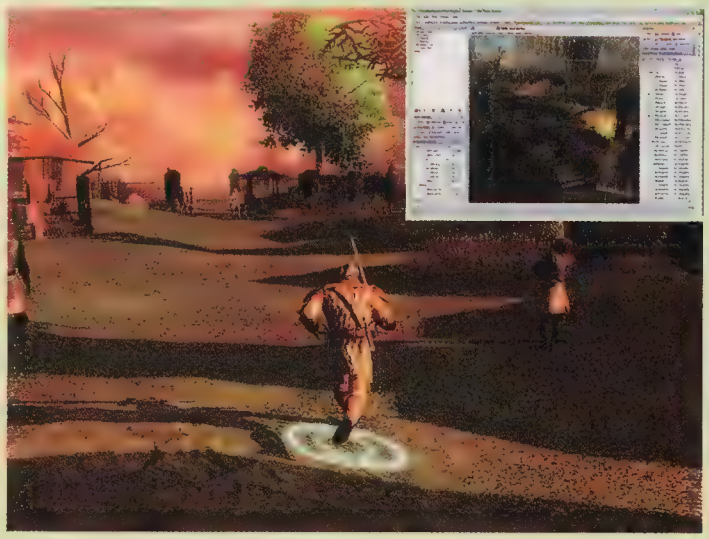


NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2 Though it seems to be the "stealth blockbuster RPG," Obsidian's sequel to BioWare's critically acclaimed game—and this publication's "Game of the Year" of 2002—looks considerably better today than it did even a year ago. It retains the same basic structure of the original: It has a large single-player game that can be played solo or cooperatively, and it also has an incredibly detailed toolkit for creating your own adventures.

The dungeon/terrain/world editor in *Neverwinter Nights 2* can create organic-looking environments that eliminate the tile-based look found in the original. Just through changing lighting and reflective effects, you can turn a simple maze-like dungeon into a creepy, fog-filled lair of death and doom.

In the solo or multiplayer game, you can create a party of up to four characters but can only control one at a time. You can, however, switch to any character at any time, even while paused.

Playing the game, it still has the same general look and feel as the previous edition, which is both good and bad. It feels a bit… old-school compared to a flashier game like *Oblivion*, and the interface feels a bit off (this was a pre-release version, however). But sometimes old-school is exactly what you're looking for. (Obsidian/Atari)



Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Double Agent

Developer/Publisher Ubisoft

The Word Ubisoft is promising that *Double Agent* won't be "more of the same" for Sam Fisher. It's supposed to be more about his being a spy and less about his being a soldier. As in more sneaking and problem solving than pure gunplay.

So there's a dramatic shift in narrative and gameplay. The first big change is the removal of Sam's signature goggles in order to focus on his role as a NOC (Non-Official Cover) agent. Even the type of stealth-based gameplay will be altered, this time involving Sam's infiltrating a terrorist cell, which puts a new spin on the title of the franchise. This set-up should offer some interesting quandaries to players, as you're a "good guy" doing bad things to protect your cover as a terrorist. Those actions should emphasize the underlying story and illustrate that you don't just show up and join a terrorist cell.

But it wouldn't be a *Splinter Cell* without the usual mixture of stealth, direct action, and puzzle solving. If Sam can do more than just save the day, this new *Cell* could reinvigorate a franchise that has lost some of its sneaky steam and cutting edge.

THE FANBOY SAYS Yo, this series hasn't delivered a dud yet.

THE CYNIC SAYS Dude, Sam Fisher, again?

Pacific Storm Because there clearly aren't enough WWII real-time strategy games out there, we have this one. At least it's somewhat different, being primarily a naval game. The big twist? You can jump into airplanes or turrets and shoot at stuff. Or crash. (Buka/CDV)

Pac-Man World Rally Because what the world needs now is a kart racing game starring Pac-Man. If you're lucky, you might run into Fygar from *Dig Dug* too. (Smart Bomb/Namco)

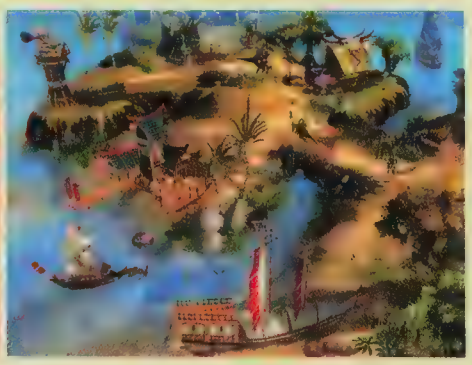
Perimeter: Emperor's Testament This lies somewhere between expansion and sequel. It includes 25 missions, a detailed storyline, an appearance of something called a "Mechanical Messiah," parallel worlds, deformable terrain, and all the other things real-time strategy fans know and love. And it's $20. (KDV Games/Paradox Entertainment)

Phantasy Star Universe Last seen being exploited to death on the Sega Dreamcast, this popular

series offers a new incarnation that features a single-player, offline story mode on top of its persistent online version. (Sonic Team/Sega)

PARAWORLD Now who doesn't think this is a good idea? Dinosaurs battle humans in this gorgeous real-time strategy game. There are three tribes—Norsemen, Dust Riders, and Dragon Clan—and they can employ both human and animal armies as they battle for control of the world.

There's just something inherently appealing about giant dinosaurs in full armor, mounted by archers. (Everyone dug those Oliphaunts in *Lord of the Rings*, right?) It might suffer a bit from "too much bloom" effect, though. (SEK/Sunflowers)



THE LIST (continued)

PT Boats: Knights of the Sea
Another of the thousand games in development in Russia, this long-in-development sim features, unsurprisingly, PT boats in WWII. It uses the *Pirates of the Caribbean* engine to generate pretty water effects. Control your boat, or let the AI do it for you. (Akella/1C)

Rayman Raving Rabbids
Rayman's world is being invaded by raving rabbids, which are kind

of like rabbits only… different. Crazier. More Rayman-esque, if you will. (Ubisoft)

Reservoir Dogs How wrong is this? You turn a talky, non-action movie into a third-person shooting and driving game that's full of action. Between those action-y

bits, you get some of those talky scenes, with Michael Madsen being the only actor who reprises his role for the game. Will they never learn? (Blitz Games/Eidos)

SAM & MAX Remember lines like this? "Sam, either termites are burrowing through my skull, or one of us is ticking." Though it's easy to forget that the puzzles in *Sam & Max* weren't great, at least compared to the sublime *Day of the Tentacle*, this is still the most anticipated adventure game on the horizon.

The first "season" of *Sam & Max* episodes will begin this fall. Though the specifics are being kept under wraps (thanks to one of those "exclusive" stories elsewhere), early images show that Telltale Games is busy recreating the look of the past games. And that's enough. For now.

But will it involve wonton destruction? We can only hope. (Telltale Games)

Warhammer: Mark of Chaos

Developer Black Hole Entertainment
Publisher Namco

The Word With the critical and commercial success of *Dawn of War*, it was only a matter of time before *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* got its turn at the plate. Whereas *Dawn of War* is a more traditional, fast-paced real-time strategy game, *Mark of Chaos* is a slower-paced one, similar to the *Total War* series.

Mark of Chaos is a blend of turn-based global strategy and real-time, formation-based battles. That's not to say that the game is a clone of *Medieval* or *Rome: Total War* with elves; its design stands on its own. For one thing, there is a central storyline that plays out during the course of the campaign. As either the Empire or the Hordes of Chaos, you have choices on the global map that have a direct impact on how the story unfolds. There's also the obvious addition of magic, which vastly alters the strategy from that of a traditional wargame. You rarely saw a Roman general unleash a fireball spell on approaching Celts. Finally, there's a cooperative campaign mode—it won't be just head-to-head battles online. It will be interesting to see how this particular feature shakes out.

In true *Warhammer* fashion, there's also a role-playing dynamic that allows you to customize your army's hero units by decking them out with myriad magic weapons, armor, and other assorted trinkets. You'll also be able to create unique heroes by choosing skills from different schools. There are two main branches: Dueling skills, which are used to battle opposing generals in one-on-one combat, and General Combat skills, which are more like a grab bag of things that help the hero become a better leader on the field. It's up to you to craft the type of army leader you want.

There are four playable races: the Empire (humans), High Elves (not the tree-hugging type), Skaven (rat men), and Khorne Chaos. (Khorne is the Chaos Blood God in *Warhammer*, who relishes battle and indiscriminate killing, so it's not a surprise that the Chaos army uses him as its patron.) Chaos fans shouldn't worry about spells, though. Even though Khorne armies disdain the use of magic, you'll be able to hire Undivided Chaos Sorcerers to fill your ranks. There are even lesser demons from other Chaos Gods such as Nurgle and Tzeentch. Freebooter units from other races, such as Orcs, Dwarves, and the Undead, are available for hire but are not fully represented in the game.

It's impossible to talk about *Mark of Chaos* without mentioning its graphics. It looks fantastic. The 3D battles are impressive, with colorful spell effects, raging Hell Cannons that demolish towers, and distinctive *Warhammer* units. The game has an exquisite level of detail—each unit in a formation of Empire soldiers looks different. Some have helms, some have long hair, and others are bald with scarred faces. Little things like this go a long way in adding visual depth. No two armies will look identical. (You can also customize units, miniatures-style.)

A Khorne Bloodthirster storming into and decimating a formation of Empire Halberdiers is something every *Warhammer* fan simply needs to see to believe. It looks that good. However, the global turn-based map is equally impressive. It too is wonderfully detailed, and it's easy to identify classic *Warhammer* locations.

Games Workshop is working closely with Namco and Black Hole to ensure that the game is pure *Warhammer* and not some outsider's interpretation. In fact, GW writers are helping to craft the story and develop the army list, so you can expect units such as Skaven Stormvermin, Imperial Pistoliers, and disgusting Chaos Spawn to populate each army's retinue.

Warhammer fans have waited patiently for the Fantasy universe to get its fair shake. It appears that shake is finally here. *Mark of Chaos* looks, at least on the surface, like the game fans have been waiting for since Games Workshop finally got serious about computer gaming.

THE FANBOY SAYS Yo, this looks... incredible.

THE CYNIC SAYS Dude, these guys made *Armies of Exigo*.

THE LIST (continued)

Savage 2: A Tortured Soul
Developer S2 Games will forgo stores and distribute this sequel from its website. It's still an innovative combination of real-time strategy and action—depending on whether you're a commander or a grunt—though games like *Natural Selection* have taken this particular gameplay ball and run with it. For what it's worth, the melee combat is supposed to be improved here, as are the visuals. And it remains a great idea. (S2 Games)

Scarface: The World Is Yours
Grand Theft Montana, and we're not talking about the state. Developer Radical Entertainment has been down this path before, with the sublime *Simpsons Hit & Run*. *Scarface* seems like an obvious choice for a *GTA* treatment, and what's been shown so far is in

the spirit of the movie and the competing videogame. Something seems slightly off—it may be too much like *GTA*. But hey, Tony Montana swears a lot. That means something, right? (Radical Entertainment/Vivendi)

Shady O'Grady's Rising Star
Winner of the "High Concept" award is this RPG, or "rock playing game." As in, it's a role-playing game set in the music world. Form a band, work on your songs, go on tour, and battle with other bands (though not literally). (Gilligames/Shrapnel Games)

Silent Heroes This is the sequel to *Soldiers: Heroes of World War II* and is not to be confused with *Faces of War*. Take command of a squad of special operations forces through a story-driven campaign. (1C/Paradox Entertainment)

Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs

Expansive Expansions

The first expansion for **Age of Empires III** is coming this fall in the form of **The WarChiefs**. It adds three Native American civilizations, including the Iroquois Confederation and Sioux. Instead of home cities, they have tribal councils, which give them the same sorts of resource benefits as the cities. The expansion will also include a new, 15-scenario campaign. Our guess is that casinos will not be included.... Visit **Lost Eden** this fall, assuming you play Funcom's **Anarchy Online**. This freebie expansion adds a new planet orbiting Rubi-Ka. Control mechs, battle in motherships, get new stuff... it's all good.... **EVE Online: The Path to Kali** should be available as you read this. It adds better visuals for all of the ships and some additions for people who don't want to be constantly drawn into PvP battles yet still want to play a part in the large-scale world simulation that's *EVE*'s greatest strength. There's also a new star system to play in.... Wouldn't you know, there's another expansion for the original **EverQuest**. Dubbed **The Serpent's Spine**, it adds a new race, the Drakkin, with its own new starting city. Sony is also promising additional content for characters of all levels, up to the new cap of 75.... **EverQuest II** isn't being neglected, as Sony also plans to roll out **Echoes of Faydwer**. The land referenced in the title will be familiar to players of the original *EverQuest*, but it'll be slightly changed. The level cap will remain at 70, but Sony is promising more gameplay for players at all levels.... Arena.net will be producing a third campaign for **Guild Wars** for the fall called **Nightfall**, which will introduce two new factions, the Dervish and the Paragon....

The next episodic episode for Half-Life 2 should arrive later this year, too; there was a teaser at the end of *Episode I*. But the bigger news is that the long-awaited, long-in-development, presumed dead *Team Fortress 2* will be the included with *Episode II*. And it's sporting a cartoon look. Weird. There will also be a game called *Portals*, which is as much a technology showcase as anything; you have a gun that can create, er, portals....

Launching in August, Ryzom Ring adds a genuinely fascinating new feature: user-created instances. The interface for doing this is incredibly simple: You pick from pregenerated landscapes, place mobs, NPCs, foliage, and herds, then set movement paths, create triggers for events (open chest, mob attacks), and generally generate simple or complex multistage scenarios. (You can't use the experience or items from these instances in the regular game, however.) These instances are only available when their creators are online; those talented folks can even control the actions or mobs as a DM, adjusting hit points and manipulating NPCs on the fly. Each of these instances can be rated by players, so it's not in anyone's interest to make them too hard or to grief players trying to complete them. It's fascinating stuff, for sure, and may be just the thing to get more people to try this graphically impressive but under-the-radar MMO....

Kohan developer Timegate Studios takes on a first-person shooter with the expansion for Monolith's **F.E.A.R.** titled **Extraction Point**, it takes place after the end of the original game. The helicopter that was flying you off to safety crashes after Alma shows up (oops, spoiler!). The clone army is out to get you, but there's still a lot of creepiness going on.... **Lock On: Black Shark** is a bit of a departure for the *Lock On* series of flight sims. Instead of modeling more jets, it will let you take the Russian Ka-50 Black Shark up for a spin.... The big twist in the **Star Wars: Empire at War** expansion **Forces of Corruption** is an entirely new *Star Wars* faction, the Underworld. Yes, they're the criminals of the universe, and they're actually the enemy of Jabba the Hutt. The expansion adds the power to bribe, perform wonderful acts of brutality, and "spread corruption" to other planets in order to take them over. (You don't have the military might of the Empire or the Rebels.) Other players will then have to deploy heroes to counter the corruption. Expect more units, improved battles, and other *Star Wars*-y goodness.... Who doesn't love that **Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War**? The second expansion is called **Dark Crusade**, and it adds two more races, the Necrons and the Tau. There's also a more open-ended strategic campaign similar to those in the *Total War* games or the "War of the Ring" mode in *Battle for Middle Earth II*. Since the expansion's not quite as focused on scripted missions, it should eliminate some of the criticisms directed at the original game's brief, linear campaign.... Finally, rumor has it those scrappy upstarts at Blizzard are readying something or other called **The Burning Crusade** for that **World of WarCraft** thing they're operating over there. You may have read about it. New races, new instances, new... stuff.

MMOS WE'RE GUESSING WON'T SHIP IN 2006

We have no great insight here, but we're going to go out on a limb and say these two "Q4 2006" games won't appear on shelves this year

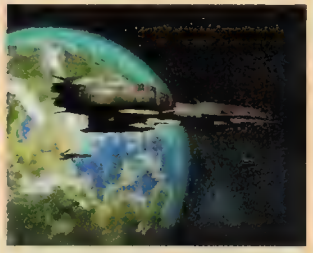
Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures The creator of *Anarchy Online* takes on Robert E. Howard's fantasy world. Its biggest innovation is a full-blown single-player game that takes the player through 20 levels; after you survive this, you're thrown into a brutal PvP world with "action" combat. Cool. (Funcom)

Tabula Rasa Richard Garriott's return to role-playing has been frequently delayed. This sci-fi MMO was ahead of its time when it was announced, but others have already adopted its innovative hub-based world and instanced, single-player-like combat areas. It looks like an *Unreal Tournament*-style 3D shooter when you observe someone playing, but it has plenty of features to assist the action-challenged. (NCSoft)

Sins of a Solar Empire It's real-time strategy. In space. You have your three races, a "dynamic" galaxy, lots of worlds to explore and exploit... yes, it's that classic 4X formula. And the name sounds way cool. (Ironclad Games)

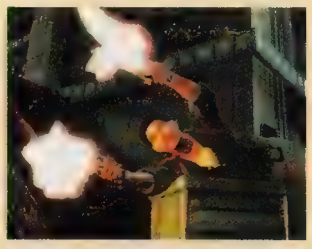
Storm of War: Battle of Britain The creator of *IL-2 Sturmovik* and *Pacific Fighters* takes on the BoB in this graphically lovely WWII sim. Expect solo and co-op multiplayer campaigns and missions, plus improved graphics and damage modeling. (Maddox Games/Ubisoft)

Starshatter: The Gathering Storm Kind of a pseudo-sequel, or an advanced expansion, or something in between, this space



combat game should have plenty of that *Starshatter*-y action everyone knows and loves. (Destroyer Studios/Matrix Games)

Stranglehold This third-person action game puts you in the stylish shoes of Tequila, the character played by Chow Yun-Fat in John Woo's *Hard Boiled*. John Woo's involvement means there are plenty

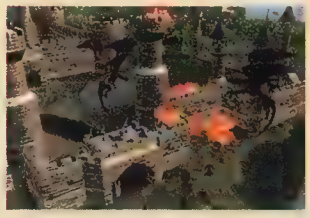


of slow-motion scenes of ballet-like action... and don't forget the flying birds in the background. Pulling off the cool moves is simple, as they're all context sensitive: Press a button while you're near a railing, and Tequila hops on and rides it down. He's so cool that he doesn't even run into tables—he slides his butt across them. (Midway)

THE LIST (continued)

Stronghold Legends

The *Stronghold* series moves from castle-building sim into the realm of more conventional real-time strategy. It will include a new,



strategic-conquest style of play, as well as modes in which you can play as King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, Count Vlad Dracul, or Siegfried of Germany in 24 missions that span three unique campaigns. (FireFly/2K Games)

Superman Returns: The Videogame

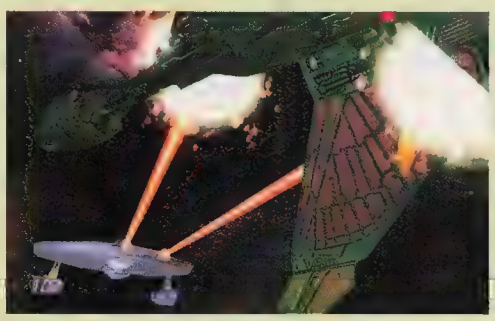
Does he still stand for "truth, justice, and all of that other stuff"? Will the game wash away the still-lingering aftertaste of the legendary N64

Superman? The game was delayed beyond its original, "let's get it out with the movie" release date, which could be a good or bad thing. (Electronic Arts)

STAR TREK: LEGACY

Bethesda boldly goes where many have gone before. This game lets you take the role of an admiral and command a task force of warships that spans the entire *Star Trek* universe, so as you advance through the game, you'll get to see an actual progression in terms of designs. And, rather than requiring you to take a Star Fleet course to get up to speed, the game promises actually to be playable. The universe isn't a flat plane but instead offers just enough for you to get the sensation of 3D without becoming unmanageable.

The single-player campaign focuses squarely on the goodie-goodie Federation, but multiplayer will open up possibilities for you to jump into those cloak-enabled Klingon Birds of Prey and Romulan War Birds, as well as various craft from the Borg. Because the license covers everything, the designers had a lot to go on for the Federation, Klingons, and Romulans. For the Borg, the game's developers did have to make up a few craft, in part because not much has been shown of their fleet except big cubes… make those big powerful cubes. (Mad Doc Software/Bethesda)



Gothic 3

Developer Piranha Bytes
Publisher Aspyr Entertainment

The Word Despite what the pale, mascara-caked lads and lasses sneering outside Hot Topic would have you believe, the name of Piranha Bytes' grim role-playing series is quite apt. *Gothic* is about a harsh medieval landscape and the even harsher folks that populate it, right down to the tattered leathers and tattooed hides. It's about grim lives, all nasty, brutish, and short, and usually hastened to their end by you, the nameless hero who plays a recurring legend in each installment's tightly crafted yet largely nonlinear story. It certainly isn't about lace cuffs and Morrissey mix tapes, at the very least. What it lacks in formally dressed vampires and flying buttresses, it more than makes up for with its vision of an alternate Dark Ages populated with Orcs, monsters, and the less-domesticated type of living dead. "Gothic" means "bloody medieval," and the *Gothic* games mean bloody business.

That's not to say that Piranha Bytes isn't trying to civilize its series a little with the third entry. Despite high critical acclaim, the first two *Gothic* games were rough around the edges, much like the rogue's gallery of characters that populate each game. In particular, the user interface for inventory and character management was stubborn and obtuse, and the first-person combat system lacked real grace. These flaws were easily glossed over by the series' strengths, like the faction-driven, nonlinear plot and the fully realized characters with whom you shared each game's world. Although the difficulty fluctuated from unforgiving to ridiculously easy with but a few skill upgrades, the cohesive and detailed environments kept you hacking away until the end. Both games delivered on the promise of a living, breathing 3D world in a unique, memorable way that similar attempts, such as *Ultima IX*, couldn't match.

Gothic 3 is Piranha Bytes' chance to bring it all together and make the definitive nonlinear epic fantasy RPG for the ages. A small team of 21 folks that have stuck together throughout the series, the developers have learned a lot of lessons, despite their success in the European market, and have listened extensively to customer criticism. In particular, the user interface and combat system have been overhauled, with the former becoming a more elegant and familiar drag-and-drop system for equipment and sundries.

The new combat system is still a real-time sword-slingin' and spell-spammin' affair, although significantly improved animations and physics give it a much ···▸

SWORD OF THE STARS Think your typical 4X game of space strategy, only with real-time 3D combat and a 3D star map. There are four races, more than 150 technologies, different transportation technologies for each race, eight-player multiplayer support, and extensive ship design options. That's a lot of stuff to balance.

It sure looks pretty, more like a space action game than a strategy title, which is probably the point. After all, why take over the galaxy two dimensions at a time when you can do it in three? (Kerberos/Lighthouse/Destineer)

Swashbucklers: Blue & Grey If it's not WWII, it's pirates. This grog-filled action/RPG lets you take control of the captain of a ship

smuggling goods during the Civil War. So you got your action, your naval combat, your open-ended world, plus pirates and the Civil War. Gotta love that. (Akella/1C)

Test Drive Unlimited This is actually called a massively multiplayer game. It gives you a large fantasy environment to explore—this one is called "Hawaii"—filled with

thousands of players. You can take missions or race against other players to earn cash and buy newer and cooler cars. Join car clubs, decorate your crib, pimp your ride… isn't this what *Motor City Online* should have been? (Eden Studios/Atari)

···▸ greater sense of kinetics than it had before. In a specific dual-wielding scenario, the left and right mouse buttons each controlled the swing of a separate sword, eliciting a flurry of cruel and well-choreographed blows. Piranha Bytes indicates that the melee combat is very much focused on action and reflex, with emphasis on timed strikes and combination moves. Alternatively, those players who are less inclined to favor facing their foe down with steel can use powerful magic from a distance or employ the features of the stealth system, augmented by skills of the more, er, discreet persuasion.

This time, the plot takes you away from the island of Khorinis to the mainland of Myrtana, where your fellow humans have been enslaved by the Orc tribes and their monstrous leader, Kan. The overall real estate is five times that of *Gothic 2* and its expansion collectively, with vastly more varied terrain. There are treacherous desert regions, snowy mountain passes, and dire jungles. Six cities punctuate the vast sweep of the terrain, each with its own specific architecture and personality. One of them, Ben Sala, is suffering its own medieval zombie apocalypse. All cities host unique NPCs and guilds to quest for, ally

with, and optionally murder for loot. Piranha Bytes' designers are especially proud of the desert cities and dungeons. They did extensive research on old-world Arabic and Middle Eastern architecture and worked to create the sense of an era lost to the sands of time.

Several factions are looking to recruit you, all of which have murky agendas. Two are struggling against the Orc oppressors: the Water Mages and the Nomad tribes that follow them and the Nordmar Barbarians of the frozen northlands. Opposing them are the Hashishan, who have been selling the Nomads and the other folk of Myrtana into slavery for power and profit, and the Black Mages, who rule the Hashishan through their mastery of the darker arcane arts. Internal struggles in the human factions can lead the player to work with either group (or with both, for a time). It's up to you to decide whom you keep close and whom you keep even closer, as it were. For example, if you're looking to play the cruel mercenary, you may want to cozy up to Zuben, the leader of the Black Mages. But if you're more of the populist Che Guevara type, you'll find your lot tossed in with the Nomads. Your choices are reflected in dialogue options, quests, factional affiliations, and a whole host of subtle branching options embedded in each component of the game. As ever, the ending you receive will depend on who your chosen allies were throughout your adventure.

Since a healthy portion of the game is set in the southern desert regions, you can expect plenty of wind-swept ancient ruins to explore, many of which offer insight into the history of Myrtana. ···▶

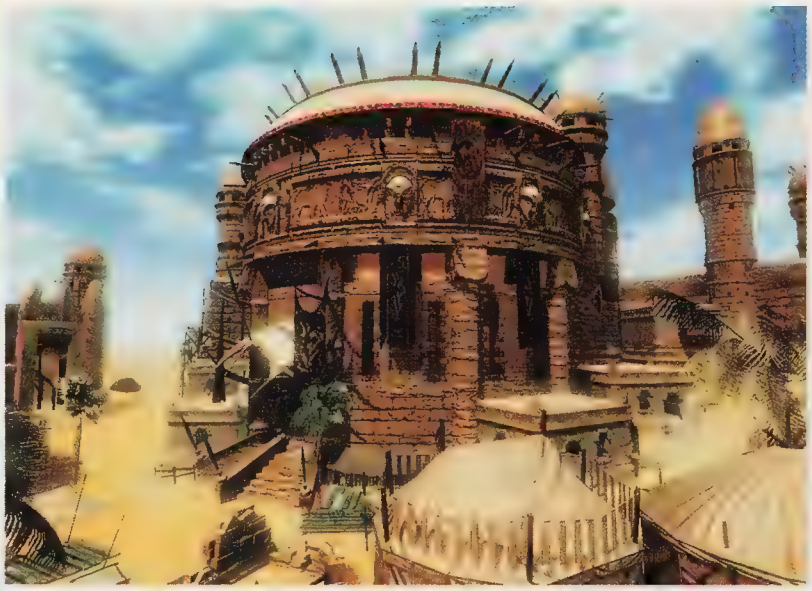
THE LIST (continued)

Theater of War

Formerly known as "WWII RTS," this platform game—kidding, WWII real-time strategy game—will feature five campaigns (US, UK, Soviet, German, French, and Polish) and a lot of historical detail. (1C/Battlefront.com)

TimeShift

This game has officially been in development forever and is now on its second publisher. It's set in the future, and your character can manipulate time. After you're sent back, you return to a changed world, and it's up to you to make it right. As in all time-traveling stories, expect many, many paradoxes. And some third-person action. (Saber Interactive/Sierra)



TWO WORLDS With the comparative scarcity of role-playing games, especially good role-playing games, a new kid on the block is usually a welcome announcement. Developer Reality Pump (*Earth 2150* and *2160*) is going the classic route here, with a non-linear story, faction-based class system, tons of side quests and character building, and a skill-based combat system that relies more on tactics than twitch.

Much in the style of *Guild Wars*' *Magic the Gathering*-esque approach to spells and abilities, you'll be acquiring tarot cards (found, bought, or stolen) that will be stackable, allowing you to mix and match a broad assemblage of talents.

Is there life after *Oblivion*? Maybe. (Reality Pump/TopWare)

THE WORD LEAD DESIGNER MICHAEL HOGE

Gothic 2 had two big issues: The UI was still fairly cumbersome, and the difficulty curve sharply arced from brutal to really easy once you got some decent kit. The fighting was heavy on the circle-strafing as well. How will *Gothic 3* address these issues?

The interface has been completely redone and will feature standard drag and drop inventory controls as well as mouse-controlled combat.

The difficulty level will be selectable. Also, some of the monsters and NPCs will gain levels as the player progresses to keep the difficulty curve in line.

The combat system has been completely redone as well. I'm quite sure it will be an improvement over what we've had before—at least, that's what all our testers say—though it's not fully completed at this time, obviously.

Do you feel the fans want or need combo-driven combat mechanics after *Gothic 2*?

It's difficult to say. Ask 10 fans and you've got 11 opinions. What is the average player, anyway? In my opinion, the average player wants it easy to use, and that's what we've implemented in *Gothic 3*.

In terms of pure real estate, how big is *Gothic 3* compared with *Gothic 2*? Did you have to make any compromises as development progressed?

Of course we had to make compromises. But, as we've always done, we tried to turn our disadvantages into advantages. It was clear from the beginning of production that we wouldn't be able to keep the "old" level of detail everywhere, so we decided to let part of the story play out in the desert. It is pretty obvious that the desert will never be as detailed as the mountain regions of Nordmar, which are about one quarter of the size when you look at the map. That said, if you're walking through the icy canyons or trying to find your way around them, you will realize that "size" doesn't matter that much.

What's the excuse for resetting the nameless hero's skills to Level 1?

None. We might let him start at Level 0 this time, but just because it feels weird to start with a Level 25 or Level 30 character. The abilities of the player will in fact be better than [those of] a "true" Level 0 character, i.e., he can fight with a sword and has certain other skills at base level. You don't have to learn everything from scratch.

We think of the starting character as a character that could have completed *Gothic 2*, assuming that you went through the game in order to solve it and maximize your stats. Still, the player wants to learn [new skills], and multiplying every character statistic by 100 cannot be the way, either. As a result, we will take away some of the "probably learned skills" from *Gothic 2* and add others that you might not have learned when you played that game. But be happy; you don't have to start all over again!

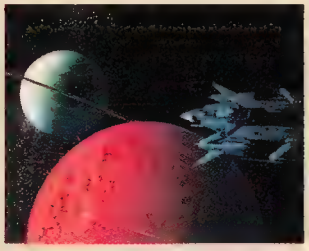
···► Piranha Bytes promises "a large number" of individually crafted dungeons for players to explore as they reconstruct the crises of the past that paved the way for the problems of the present. That's not to say that you'll spend all your time shaking sand and scorpions from your boots, though. The Middle Realm, where the seat of human dominion once resided, is seething with Orcs that now hold the reins of power in their warty green fists. In the far north, you'll encounter the frozen reaches of Nordmar, where a faction of resident barbarians still guard against the Orcish occupation and are none-too-friendly toward those sneaky human folk from the south, either.

Although *Gothic 2* did the "living, breathing" world thing well, Piranha Bytes is adding a few more AI features that will help bring Myrtana to life. Of particular note is the AI for allies who may accompany you in various quests and fights and who add a note of camaraderie to a game whose antics previously tended to be solo. In fact, many old faces and friends from the past return in this game, including your boon companion Diego from the first *Gothic*. Enemy characters will also move to aid one another as their alliances permit and will navigate the terrain in a much more natural fashion.

The developers promise an all-new system of skills and spells for character development. Basic skills such as combat, magic, and thievery are still leveled up as they were in *Gothic 2*. But the guild system for advanced skills has been upgraded with the availability of "perks" that can be purchased from and improved by specific trainers throughout Myrtana, assuming the player meets the basic statistical requirements. New abilities include dual-wielding, high-speed sprinting and the ability to do additional damage against various racial and monster ···►

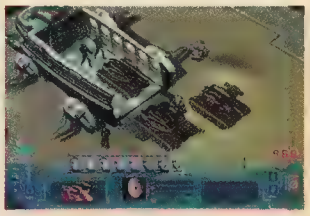
THE LIST (continued)

The Tomorrow War
This space sim is based on the trilogy of novels by author Alexander Zorich. There are two



empires fighting it out; pick sides, take on missions, hang out with aliens, and shoot things. (Crioland/1C)

Tortuga: Two Treasures
Yes, folks. More pirates. Seek fame and fortune on the high seas and eventually get back at the legendary Blackbeard. Rum may be involved. (Ascaron/CDV)



UFO: Extraterrestrials
Someday, someone will remake *X-COM* and get it right. This probably isn't that game. (Chaos Concepts/TriSynergy)

WarFront: Turning Point
This WWII real-time strategy game asks the question, "What would have happened if Hitler was assassinated early in the war?" There may be robots involved. (Digital Reality/CDV)

You Are Empty
Honestly, there's a chance this will suck. But the name… imagine it spoken with a thick German accent. It just screams, "Play me, before I descend into my bottomless pit of despair." (Digital Spray/1C)

···► types. Players can freely pick skills and perks across guilds, although eventually an occupation will have to be chosen, albeit later in the quest than in *Gothic 2*.

There are also several new spells, including Time Warp (which slows down time around the player, natch) and Army of Darkness, which summons a horde of angry ossified undead (unfortunately minus Bruce Campbell). The visuals for these spells are ratcheted well beyond those of the prequels, with eye-popping light and smoke effects. Magic weapons, by contrast, remain rare. Michael Hoge, the lead designer on the game, wants the most powerful gear to be something "truly special," not just another Holy Avenger +5 taking up slots in your backpack next to the Flaming Mace +4.

And, of course, there are the graphics. The screenshots alone should attest to the *Oblivion*-level workout videocards will get, and a full-blown physics model backs those visuals. Weather and environment effects drape the high-poly landscapes and go the extra mile toward putting you in the hob-nailed boots and combat leathers of the nameless protagonist. A powerful level-of-detail (LOD) engine ensures that every vista you can see is ultimately a destination, with no fog to hide rendering artifacts on the horizon.

The rest of the multimedia experience hasn't been neglected; there are over 200,000 spoken lines of acted dialogue and an appropriately sweeping orchestral score.

It's been pretty clear from the beginning that there's something special about the *Gothic* series. It's always had a fierce ambition that's shone through some of its coarser aspects. It's done what many PC RPG series have promised in terms of offering more emergent gameplay and meaningful interaction, but in the past it exacted a price in terms of accessibility and ease of use. Now, with a friendlier face and the polish that comes with lessons learned from previous triumphs, this sequel is set to challenge the well-heeled *Elder Scrolls* titles for mastery of the first-person RPG estate. It's no mean comparison, either. If you're looking for an RPG experience that's as deep and solid as *Oblivion* and puts a greater focus on NPC interaction, then *Gothic 3* is shaping up to be as charming as it gets, barbarians and all.

THE FANBOY SAYS Yo, move over *Oblivion!*

THE CYNIC SAYS Dude, too quirky, too German.

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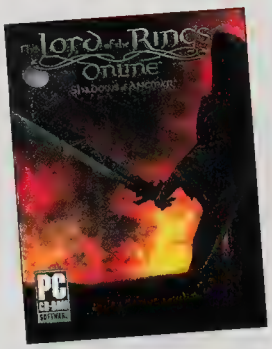

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Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar

The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar is the world's first and only MMOG based on the literary works of J.R.R. Tolkien. Players can experience the most famous fantasy world of all time, exploring and adventuring their heroes through the vast reaches of Middle-earth in the fight against the forces of the Dark Lord Sauron.

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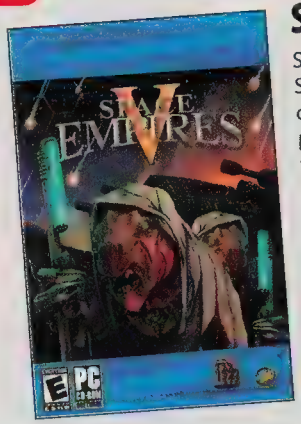

Space Empires V

Space Empires V is the latest edition in the Space Empires series. This new chapter completely updates the UI and takes the player into a real-time rendered 3D universe. Watch space battles played out in glorious detail and realistic effects. Expand, Explore, Exploit, and Exterminate in a huge living breathing galaxy. Due to player demand, the game is completely "moddable" and even adds a scriptable AI system to the mix. Space Empires V boldly takes the next step in the genre of space strategy.

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Company of Heroes

Company of Heroes is a WWII RTS game that brings to life the journey of the brave men of Able Company as they fight across Europe in the greatest war mankind has known.

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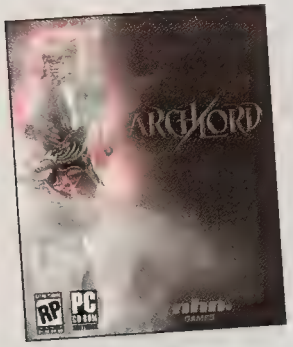

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Archlord

The ArchLord system, which sees one player rise to become the game world's supreme ruler for a month, revolves around a player securing three holy relics known as Archons. ArchLord's game world is the mystical land Chantra, and play is set deep within the world's Middle Ages. Players embark on specific quests to gain great knowledge surrounding the true history of Chantra and the Archons that reside within.

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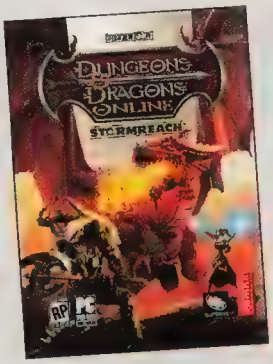

Dungeons & Dragons Online

The bustling frontier city of Stormreach has grown safe and secure as the only gateway to the riches of Xen'drik. But now danger threatens! Few explorers who set out adventuring the lands ever return, and those that do bring back only tales of death and destruction. Are you a match for the fearsome monsters and the dungeons?

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Guild Wars Factions

Guild Wars Factions takes place on the Asian-inspired continent of Cantha, where players create a character from eight distinct professions and join an epic quest that pits two warring factions, the Luxons and the Kurzicks, against an ancient evil, and against each other. As players become embroiled in this brutal war of conquest, new missions provide both roleplaying fans and competitive PvP players the opportunity to help determine the fate of Cantha.

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Auto Assault

Auto Assault is the ultimate in car combat. Head out onto the highways of a post-apocalyptic future in your high-powered, fully armed vehicle. Play as one of three warring races in this, the fastest, most destructive MMORPG ever!

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Four years have passed since the aftermath of Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos, and a great tension now smolders throughout the ravaged world of Azeroth. This is Blizzard's award-winning massively multiplayer online role-playing game.

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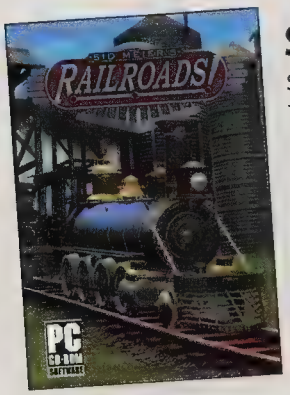

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Sid Meier's Railroads!

Sid Meier's Railroads! marks the return of the watershed title in simulation/strategy gaming that launched the popular "tycoon" genre, and inspired a new generation of games. Railroads! comes home to its original creator, the legendary Sid Meier, who, together with his team at Firaxis Games, will take this game to a whole new level of fun!

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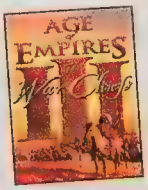

Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs

The new expansion pack for the best-selling real-time strategy (RTS) title of 2005 engages gamers in epic warfare where they will lead the proud Native American civilizations.

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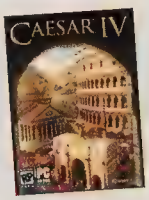

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The spirit of Silmeria has awakened—a situation Odin will not ignore for long. This installment introduces the new Photon Action System to the classic side-scrolling action

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The peaceful world of the LocoRoco are under attack by the not-so-nice Moja Corps! Move them through more than 40 levels of slippery slopes, teetering platforms and maze-like passages. All you need is to tilt, roll and bounce the happy creatures to safety!

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The sequel doubles the number of stages, adds a free-look camera, adds new ways to control your mercury "blob" and much more. Supporting two players, Mercury Meltdown offers many new modes for ultimate party-puzzle action.

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Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins

Directed by the original's creator Tokurou Fujiwara. The game makes use of a 3D graphics engine but plays in a side-scrolling perspective to stay true to the original. Defeat enemies using your best platforming skills.

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Gun:Showdown

Play the role of Colton White, a vengeful gunslinger making his way through the untamed West of the late-1800s where the lines between good and evil are blurred and greed, lust and brutality were a way of life.

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Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

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Spyhunter: Nowhere to Run

The Spy Hunter franchise goes where it's never gone before – on foot. In Nowhere to Run, the evil NOSTRA corporation returns, this time with a plan to steal the latest government technology including the world's most sophisticated spy vehicle, the Interceptor, and it's up to Alex to stop them.

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You are a Latin field operative backed by a top secret US government agency who will overthrow the corrupt government of San Esperito. The rogue South American state is suspected of stockpiling Weapons of Mass Destruction, and it's your mission to negate the threat this poses to world peace.

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Sam Fisher is back. To stop a devastating terrorist attack, he must infiltrate a vicious terrorist group and destroy it from within.Experience the relentless tension and gut-wrenching dilemmas of life as a double agent.

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A new world order is established after the destruction of the "mysterious power stone." Warriors are destined to battle in a place far beyond their imagination, as a magnificent story spun of drama and emotion unfolds from multiple perspectives.

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Saints Row

From the spectacular opening battle to regain control of the local hood, Saints Row offers the freedom to explore StilWater, a living, breathing city. Players are free to engage in the multitude of different activities at their leisure, all while building up respect in a gameplay-rich world.

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Players take on the role of Colonel Michael Swift. Armed with a time-control device called the Quantum Suit and a time machine called the Chronomicon, Swift is both on the run and on a mission to set time straight once again.

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Sam Fisher is back. To stop a devastating terrorist attack, he must infiltrate a vicious terrorist group and destroy it from within. Experience the relentless tension and gut-wrenching dilemmas of life as a double agent.

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Movement: 1
Level: 1
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881 AD

[clockwise from top] We come from the land of the ice and snow, from the midnight sun where the hot springs blow; Death rides a pale horse through the corn and then shoots fireballs at a musketeer; Good fences make good neighbors; Vikings love treasure.

Warlords of the Worlds

Civilization IV: Warlords proves the old adage that only Firaxis can go to China BY TOM CHICK

★★★½

Genre More Scenarios **Developer** Firaxis **Publisher** 2K Games **ESRB** E10+ **Requirements** Civilization IV

The reason to get this expansion for *Civilization IV* isn't the extra stuff tossed into the core game. For instance, you don't want *Warlords* for the new civs. (Welcome, Ottomans, Vikings, Zulus, Koreans, and Celts. Frankly, you weren't really missed, but welcome anyway.) You certainly don't want it for the new units—all two of them—which are just a pair of plugs to fill the gaps in ancient combat where trebuchets and triremes would be. You don't want it for the new wonders. Yeah, sure, the Great Wall looks good on any empire. But you're scraping the bottom of the world history barrel when the best you can come up with is the Temple of Artemis and the University of Sankore (which is, quite literally, in Timbuktu).

You might want *Warlords* for the new buildings unique to each civ, but these are the same ones you've had all along, now with tweaks for specific nationalities. You probably won't want *Warlords* for the warlords themselves. You get these Great Persons by fighting, and you can dismantle them to give a stack of units a mess of experience or to add military buffing buildings to your cities. All these new features—the civs, the Wonders, the units, the buildings—are desultory bits and pieces, a collection of bullet points that are more patchwork than expansion. They add up to little, considering the scope of what you've already got.

In fact, the reason to get *Warlords* is for the scenarios. It's worth noting that there are already plenty of scenarios available for free, thanks to the generous modability Firaxis built into *Civilization IV*. The real competition for *Warlords* is stuff like the superlative "Fall from Heaven" mod that adds a magic system, fleshes out religion, and creates some wild new races. Why pay $30 when there are things like that available?

The answer is the difference between fan-made and professional product. The folks at Firaxis have, for the most part, earned your $30 with the considerable work and obvious talent that went into these scenarios. As far as themes go, the selection is disappointingly limited. They're all set in ancient times, and they don't veer significantly from dryly historical material. The lone exception is "Omens," but it's the weakest scenario. It situates 18th-century France and America on either side of a Native American tribe that they must convert or conquer. Occasionally, Pestilence, Hunger, War, and then Death send in über-units to smack around whoever's in second place. Making the loser lose even more isn't a very good game mechanic, the details of what's happening are poorly documented, and the scripting seems broken (the scenario doesn't end).

Although it's fitting, considering the title, too many of the scenarios focus on combat. "Alexander the Great" is just a long conquest that progresses almost on rails. The world unfurls in front of you, from the Greeks to the Persians to the Egyptians to the Indians, with a tech tree focused on unit upgrades and a dumbed-down civics track that gives you maintenance discounts as you conquer.

At least the "Genghis Khan" and "Age of the Vikings" scenarios, which are also combat heavy, have their own unique mechanics to keep the gameplay lively. Genghis chooses his victims by the technology he wants to assimilate, but he's at the mercy of whatever units his camps periodically spit out. The Vikings are all about the bottom line, hoarding gold to meet their victory condition. They can invest tech to track down storied treasures and then haul them back to Bergen on longboats to boost their score. "The Peloponnesian War" plays with the new vassal system, but it ultimately comes down to a 100-turn combat slog between two elaborately preconstructed sides.

"Barbarian Horde" is like a bit of stunt modding intended to show off how much better Firaxis can do than a mere mod. It's a cute but ultimately tedious diversion that lets you buy a horde of barbarians for the express purpose of tearing down dynamically generated civilizations. Think of it as a *Civ* mini-game based on plundering.

"Rise of Rome" is one of the better scenarios, although it's questionable whether the AI can handle the focus on the scenario's victory locations. Five established Mediterranean civilizations (including the Celts, who start with a dozen settlers, a strong army, and elbow room to spare) fight over four victory obelisks, each of which raises your score every turn you hold it. Which of your neighbors will you attack? Or, if you're the considerably more powerful Rome, which doesn't start with any victory obelisks, which two of your neighbors will you attack?

The best *Warlords* scenario is easily "Chinese Unification." It's a veritable knife fight in a phone booth, with a set of geographically close families vying for control of ancient China. With its own set of rules, techs, and civics, it's both like and unlike *Civilization IV*. Old school Koei fans, as well as folks who wouldn't know a Yan from a Han, will have a great time with this one. It's exotic without being obtuse or too unfamiliar. Although it plays out on a fixed map (only "Barbarian Horde" is played on a randomly generated map), it has plenty of replay value because of how differently each family starts out. It upstages nearly everything else in *Warlords*, and it's the best example of how sometimes $30 can buy something considerably better than what you can download for free. ■

[left to right] Suicide bombers of the future; Trade medicine, spirits, androids, or even video games (banned by some forms of government); "Hey, wanna hear a cheesy story about a guy trying to solve the mystery of his father's murder?"

DarkStar One

Have ship, will travel/trade/fight

★ ★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Latter-day Elite **Developer** Ascaron
Publisher CDV **ESRB** Teen
Requirements 1.6Ghz CPU; 512MB RAM

Like the ocean in the olden days, space is something you cross. The trick is keeping the crossing from being boring (eye candy can only get you so far).

Here is the first sign that *DarkStar One*, a space combat/trading game from German developer Ascaron (known mainly for a *Diablo* clone called *Sacred*), knows what it's doing: You don't have to fly to any jump gates. Press "H" for hyperspace, enjoy a loading screen that presents some helpful contextual information, and you're there. Of course, there's still the trade station you have to reach, which tends to be 10u (for "units") from where you hyperspaced into the system. Hold down the time compression key and zip your way in.

If you want to spring for it, there's even a docking computer to speed up the process. Shades of *Elite*, but you never have to do anything fancy like match the spin of a space station. Just slam your ship into the open docking bay door—come in at full afterburner if you want—and you're good to go. And you know those times in other games when you can't hyperspace out because there are pirates too close, so you have to wait forever to outrun them, 0.1u or whatever at a time? *DarkStar One* lets you use the time compression when you're running away. It's all about minimizing downtime without taking away the feeling of crossing space.

DarkStar One is as slick as *Freelancer* but not as futile. It's as detailed as *X3* but not as obtuse. It's not a punishing game, at least not until you're several hours in and pushing too early against the storyline without having paid the requisite money sinks—in which case *DarkStar One* is an unforgiving bitch. There's even a touch of *Pirates!* in how consistently it rewards you for doing your own thing. In the serene loveliness, exciting combat, and DIY character (i.e., spaceship) development, there's even a bit of *Oblivion* here. Clunky Euro-story aside, if someone were to make *Elite* today, this is what it would hopefully be like: a space trading/combat game that knows how to balance pacing, freedom, and storyline.

So your father has been killed and he's left you a mysterious ship and blah, blah, blah. The game starts with some superficial trading, equipment upgrading, pirate

battles, and side missions. It all seems very simple. Too simple. There's no revelation or hallelujah moment, such as when you emerged from the dungeon in *Oblivion* or realized you could just head in a straight line in one direction in *Grand Theft Auto*. Instead, *DarkStar One* slowly reveals itself, more like a striptease than a fireworks show.

It takes its time, but it gets better. When you open the galaxy map, push your mouse against the edge of the screen. Bet you didn't know it was going to scroll that far. And yes, you will eventually go to all those uncharted places. As you progress through the universe, new races, weapons, ships, and missions emerge.

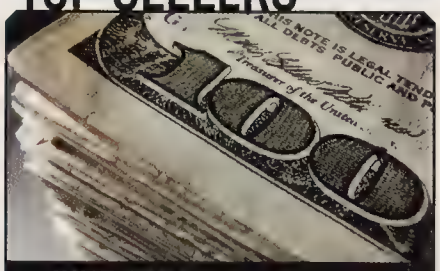
What drives *DarkStar One* as a game is the same thing that drives—you'll never guess—a platformer on a PlayStation 2. Scattered throughout the universe are 100 artifacts, most of which are displayed on the map when you enter a new area. You'll usually have to fly into the guts of mined asteroids to pick them up. Consider it an ever-so-slight nod to dungeon crawling in a fantasy RPG. You collect these "coins" to level up and configure your ship. Do you want more speed, more cargo capacity, or more firepower? The basic decision is between trading or combat (very mouse friendly, no joystick required), or whatever combination thereof you want. Further define your role by buying equipment and weapons. You even have an über-weapon that you can develop along a skill tree to "cast" spell-like special attacks.

To unlock new areas and get more artifacts, you'll need to jump through the story hoops. So *DarkStar One* proceeds in fits and starts along parallel tracks, one scripted and the other dynamic: story, artifacts, story, artifacts, story, etc. It's a lively world, free-form but not aimless, littered with side missions, trading, escorts, pirating, and pirate-hunting along the way.

This is not a stingy game. Nearly everything you do will earn you some sort of profit, but it's about the long-term gratification. *DarkStar One* is for the long haul, set in a world as vast as you'd expect. As with any epic RPG, you'll sink at least 30 hours into this one, some of them level grinding, some of them simply crisscrossing systems, some of them backtracking to get those artifacts that you couldn't reach before, and some of them reloading from the same autosave because, damn it, you're going to get past this mission if it kills you...only to decide six tries later that you're going to have to do a few trade runs so you can afford better shields before you try again.

And *DarkStar One* is good enough that you probably won't even mind. **–Tom Chick**

TOP SELLERS



JUNE 2006

1. **World of WarCraft**
   Blizzard Entertainment ★★★★★
2. **Half-Life 2: Episode I**
   Valve ★★★
3. **Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff**
   Electronic Arts Not Rated
4. **Cars: Radiator Springs Adventures**
   THQ Not Rated
5. **Sims 2: Open for Business**
   Electronic Arts ★★★★
6. **The Sims 2**
   Electronic Arts ★★★★★
7. **Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion**
   Bethesda ★★★★★
8. **Guild Wars: Factions**
   NCSoft Not Rated
9. **Heroes of Might and Magic V**
   Ubisoft ★★★½
10. **Age of Empires III**
    Microsoft ★★★
11. **Zoo Tycoon 2**
    Microsoft ★★★★
12. **Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends**
    Microsoft ★★★★
13. **Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection**
    Microsoft Not Rated
14. **Star Wars Empire at War**
    LucasArts ★★★★½
15. **Hitman: Blood Money**
    Eidos ★★½
16. **Civilization IV**
    2K Games ★★★★★
17. **Battlefield 2**
    Electronic Arts ★★★★½
18. **WarCraft III Battle Chest**
    Blizzard Entertainment ★★★★½
19. **Sims 2 Nightlife**
    Electronic Arts ★★★★
20. **SimCity 4 Deluxe**
    Electronic Arts ★★★

Source: NPD Group/NPD Funworld. The June list is based on units sold by more than 70 channel partners, representing 90% of the U.S. retail consumer market.

King of the B-Games

Hard Truck Apocalypse is the worst game you can't stop playing BY STEVE BAUMAN

★ ★ ½

Genre Brilliantly Bad B-grade Budgetware **Developer** Targem
Publisher Buka/CDV **ESRB** Teen **Requirements** 2GHz CPU; 512MB RAM

What's in a name? Sometimes, it's a perfect descriptor of what's in store for you: *DOOM*. *Quake*. *Pariah*. *The Varghina Incident*. Others are more generic: *Dungeon Siege*. *Titan Quest*. *Final Fantasy*. *The Varghina Incident*.

Hard Truck Apocalypse, on the other hand, kind of sounds like bad futuristic porn. Its logo design is cribbed from *Fallout*. Its box tells you it has "Hollywood physics," whatever that means. This isn't a good start. But this mission-based, open-ended caRPG—in the most literal sense, as you never leave your "hard truck" and upgrade its chassis, cab, and trailer throughout—is the biggest surprise of 2006.

> **"If Ed Wood were alive and making games, they might resemble this."**

Or at least it's surprising that it's remotely worth your $20. In so many ways, this is a terrible game. The English translation is *Zero Wing*-level bad. You get lines like "Do you remember, when you sent the mercenaries to made a raid to frighten the people of Krai?" or "She, who have seen it all with her own eyes" or the best, telling a woman, "I smell fish" instead of "That sounds fishy." The storyline is incomprehensible and may involve a postnuclear world, aliens, and someone named Alice you find yourself inexplicably following around. (Is that… an allusion?) The music sounds like bad 1980s action movie synthesizer fare. If Ed Wood were alive and making games, they might resemble this.

The missions are repetitive, mostly involving you driving from one place to another and shooting something. Most are FedEx quests, but you also find yourself escorting the slowest vehicles known to man from town to town. Some missions require you to go on extended drives across the maps and through multiple regions. You can get hung up on the environment, and the enemy AI is brain-dead.

But that seems appropriate for this game, because, despite all those negatives, it has a certain… something. The terrible translation is charming in its awfulness—when guys attack you, they often say, "The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire" for no apparent reason. The combat is surprisingly strategic, as you need to figure out which weapons work best on the various mounting points of each of the car's components—some of

which are blocked from firing at certain angles. You can also set weapons groups, so you can always fire your machine guns but use a different button to fire your cannons or energy weapons.

The overall structure is inherently appealing, since it gives you the ability to drive anywhere and take on a number of randomly generated missions to score some easy cash. Almost everything drops loot, and there are items scattered around the landscape, away from the roads. If you fail on some missions, the game opens up new mission threads to obtain a different solution. There's an undeveloped faction system, where you curry favor with one group of bandits over another, and it shows more potential than anything tangible within the game.

All of that sounds pretty wonderful, but make no mistake—most people will find this pretty bad. Given the decidedly mixed gameplay, you have to have a serious love of kitsch to get far in *Hard Truck Apocalypse*. But if you're a certain sort, it's worth playing just to get to the amazing ending. It consists of a single screen of text and then drops you to the main menu. It's the perfect ending for the most imperfectly playable bad game of the year. ■

PureSim Baseball 2007

Getting better with age

★ ★ ★ ★

Genre Text-y Baseball **Developer** Shaun Sullivan
Publisher Matrix Games **ESRB** Everyone
Requirements 800MHz; 128 MB RAM

PureSim Baseball continues to improve with every release. The 2007 model adds a few necessary design tweaks, such as multiple levels of minor leagues, and a more detailed almanac so that you can track more information about your league's history. It also does a fantastic job of simulating historical seasons, thanks to its built-in Lahman Database support. Even though the default game uses fictional players and teams, you can easily import any season in baseball history, going back to the early 1900s.

A few quibbles keep the game from reaching elite status. The interface remains a bit clunky, with multiple pop-up windows and screens that need to be expanded to show statistics that should be viewable at a glance. The AI is a bit haphazard, because it looks solely at player ratings when making roster decisions and doesn't take statistics into account. Just because a player belts 40 homers in 2006 doesn't mean a team will play him in 2007 if he's suffered a slight ratings hit. He may sit on the pine the whole year or even get a ticket to the minors. Aspects like this can have a negative impact on a league's credibility, when star players one year turn into lost bench players the next.

The most obvious addition is an animated baseball that appears during the games themselves. Even without moving players, it's amazing how much this simple animation adds to the drama of a game.

PureSim 2007 isn't as finely detailed as a game like *Out of the Park Baseball 2006*, but it clearly deserves to be mentioned in the same breath. It's easily one of the best text-based sports sims on the market today.
–William Abner

NFL Head Coach 2006

Bringing you all of the tedium of being in charge

★ ★

Genre 3D Text Football Sim
Developer/Publisher EA Sports **ESRB** Everyone
Requirements 1.4GHz; 128 MB RAM

For years, it's been the dream of sports fans to see a deep, statistics-driven game like *Front Office Football* or *Out of the Park Baseball* with high-end, modern-day graphics. In fact, old games like *MicroLeague Baseball* and *Front Page Sports Football* did this very thing back when 2D graphics were

[clockwise form upper left] This is no text sim, that's for sure; The office. Let the busywork begin; Instant replays look just as good as Madden.

all the rage. EA Sports' new "sports strategy game" *NFL Head Coach 2006* is a mess from top to bottom. But it does do one very important thing: It shows you how fantastic a game like this could be if it were done right.

The most egregious crime is the game's interface. It's a monstrosity of a design, one full of unnecessary busywork. The idea is to simulate the day-to-day life of an NFL head coach, but the problem is that this isn't always a lot of fun. For example, you have multiple "Office Hours" scheduled each week, during which you can change your depth chart or make other roster moves. You only get two actions per Office Hour session, so you can make two subtle depth chart changes, and that's it. After that, you have to go on to the next "task," such as meeting with your staff or talking to the owner, who basically tells you the same thing each week. Then it's back to the office to make another depth chart change. The entire off-the-field portion of the game operates like this; you see as much of the "loading" screen as you do of the actual game. It's tedious.

The games themselves are entertaining to a point, depending on how much realism you're after. Since this is a hands-off coaching simulation, it's safe to assume that the target audience is looking for a more realistic rendition than they get from games like *Madden* or *NFL 2K*. At times the game shines, as basic football principles are reflected better than they are in arcade games. Players are rated in more categories, and they fluctuate depending on how their practices went that week. These traits are reflected on the field, so if you ask a quarterback with poor long-ball accuracy to heave it deep, it could wind up anywhere.

Unfortunately, there are other parts of the game where realism flies out the window. You can't edit the clock or use an accelerated one; it's five minutes, period. Interceptions plague the game—it strips away any sense of realism when Peyton Manning tosses his sixth pick against the Browns in a five-minute game. The computer never returns a punt, and defensive linemen pose no threat of sacking the quarterback (you have to blitz a linebacker or defensive back). Finally, in a *coup de grâce* to realism, each team signs each and every one of its free agents in the off season, making rebuilding virtually impossible because teams have so much initial cap space. A broken free agency feature makes a modern-day NFL sim impossible to recommend to anyone who's remotely serious about experiencing life as a real head coach.

Even though its first attempt is a bust, EA Sports is clearly onto something. When everything clicks, when you call a perfect drive that keeps the defense guessing, *Head Coach* provides more drama and excitement than any arcade sports game. Watching your quarterback throw into double coverage while you sit helplessly on the sideline is frustrating, but in a good way—it's what a real coach has to suffer. Conversely, it's gratifying when you call a perfect play action pass and the defense is in the wrong coverage, and it's a wonderful experience to see it all happen in living color.

If only the rest of the game were as good as those fleeting moments. **–William Abner**

Shadowgrounds

Bursting with flavor

★ ★ ★ ½

Genre Death From Above **Developer** Frozenbyte
Publisher Meridian4 **ESRB** Mature
Requirements 1.5GHz CPU; 384MB RAM

Despite a name that sounds like a new blend at Starbucks, there's a lot to like about *Shadowgrounds*. This sci-fi, top-down, old-school shooter's conceit—tough guy kills freaky critters and collects PDAs in a pitch-black space station—elicits obvious comparisons with *Doom 3*, but what's surprising is that the comparisons are favorable.

Even without John Carmack's lauded

The scenery is quite beautiful when not caked with gore; Collect upgrade parts from fallen foes to enable special abilities and secondary modes.

graphics engine, *Shadowgrounds* provides striking visuals, thanks to quality art direction and solid technology. Both games employ relentless darkness, but *Shadowgrounds*' shoulder-mounted rechargeable flashlight is a boon to those who hated choosing between seeing and shooting in id's duct tape–free vision of the future. And, while *Doom 3* relied on haunted house scare tactics for its thrills, *Shadowgrounds* creates a more pervasive sense of dread with every errant silhouette created by your flashlight's beam and every muted chirp given off by your short-range motion detector. Factor in some optional but rewarding exploration, a convenient mapping scheme that tracks objectives, a large arsenal with upgrades that encourage varied tactics, and a serviceable co-op mode for up to four players, and you've got a budget title that delivers more punch than many so-called AAA games.

Which is why it is so infuriating that *Shadowgrounds* lacks a decent save system. Your progress is only retained on a level-by-level basis. Checkpoints are eschewed in favor of a respawning mechanic: whenever you're disemboweled, atomized, or eaten, you lose one of a limited number of lives and respawn in a safe place earlier in the level. Unless, of course, you've retreated to that unidentified "safe place" during your firefight, in which case you resurrect in the middle of an ambush. Lose all of your lives, and you have to restart the level. Considering that levels can take well over an hour to complete and that certain triggered events can easily chew through your lives, it seems that respawning is less about the manual's claim of "keep[ing] the tension high" than about artificially lengthening a relatively brief experience. Those with limited schedules will find this especially frustrating, as it's impossible to have shorter play sessions. If the game is successful enough to get the sequel it deserves, here's hoping Frozenbyte maintains *Shadowgrounds*' addictive jolt while making the save system easier to stomach. **–Justin Fletcher**

Harpoon 3: Advanced Naval Warfare

A floating museum

★ ★ ★

Genre War at Sea
Developer Advanced Gaming Systems
Publisher Matrix Games **ESRB** Unrated
Requirements 800MHz CPU; 512MB RAM

Harpoon 3: Advanced Naval Warfare is a reminder that today's gamers have it easy. Advanced Gaming Systems' refit and revision of the classic naval wargame leaves the cumbersome and confusing interface from *Harpoon 2* and *3* in place. You don't need your right mouse button, and it takes four or five clicks of the left one to do anything. Plus, newcomers must read the manual, even for the tutorial.

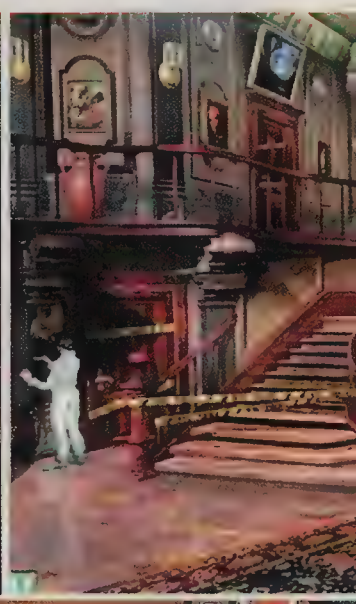
Once you get over that hurdle, the fading glory that was and is the finest naval series ever made for the computer is apparent. The scenario variety can't be beaten, as you lead fleets and flotillas of dozens of nations in dozens of scenarios. You have to translate an almost bewildering display of data into useable information, plan your attack or defense, and strike a blow for the good guys.

Beyond the full menu of missions, *Harpoon* is still fresh because of how it keeps challenging you to handle multiple tasks in a crisis situation without being overwhelming. You can pause at any time to get your bearings, but the momentary lack of a ticking clock will do nothing to stop that missile from hitting your aircraft carrier once time starts again. Few games accomplish this marriage of tension and patience so well.

Still, the only major addition is the potential for multiplayer. Long desired by *Harpoon* fanatics, *Advanced Naval Warfare* only partially delivers. The multiplayer system is as dated as the game's interface and sense of global threats. A stand-alone server is recommended, and setting it up requires mucking about in configuration files and doing other things that were too much trouble even when *Harpoon* was new. Once established, the experience doesn't quite live up to the hype, unless both parties are already comfortable with the archaic windows in front of them.

Advanced Naval Warfare is not for rookies reared on rollover tooltips, but even seasoned salts will require a bit of time to get reacquainted. Plus, the price tag is a stunner, even if you can't get this experience anywhere else. It's still an impressive and compelling game; it's just badly in need of modernization. **–Troy S. Goodfellow**

Things can get very confusing very quickly.



Don't Call it a Comeback

The latest crop of mystery adventures is a mixed bag. BY LARA CRIGGER

Finding a decent mystery adventure game—the meaty, gripping kind with detectives, murders, and global conspiracies—is a lot like playing "Where's Waldo?" You know the good titles are out there somewhere, but you'll give yourself cataracts straining to find them.

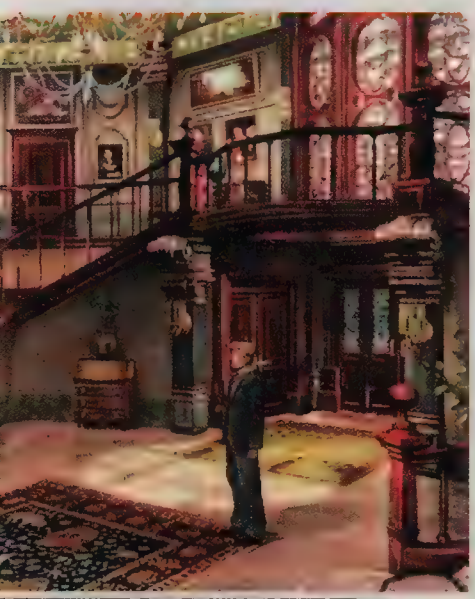
For instance, take **Secrets of Da Vinci: The Forgotten Manuscript** (Nobilis/E10+/★★★). No, the game is not affiliated with Dan Brown, Opus Dei, albinos, or Tom Hanks, so if you're looking for *The Da Vinci Code Strikes Back*, try again. Instead, the game focuses on the real-life Da Vinci, or at least his house. Set three years after Leonardo's death, *Secrets of Da Vinci* tasks you with finding one of the old man's lost codices, hidden somewhere among his many possessions at Cloux Manor, his country estate.

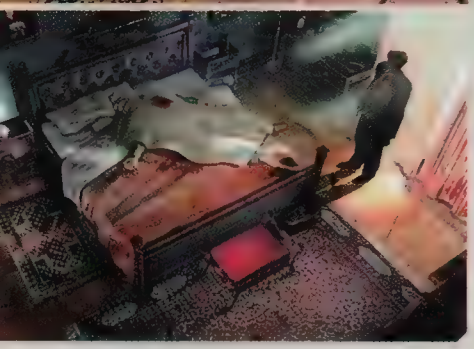
Although the idea of rummaging through Leonardo's things may sound intriguing, the game itself keeps you at arm's length, treating you as a witness to Da Vinci's world, not a participant. Like a museum, the scenery is mostly off-limits, and few objects are interactive. Though well balanced, the puzzles often lack sufficient explanation, leaving you feeling lost in an endless parade of fetch-quests. Aloof and distant, *Secrets of Da Vinci* isn't a bad game, just an unfriendly one.

Crime Stories (The Adventure Company/Teen/★) is merely tragic, a paranormal murder mystery whose downfall is its overenthusiasm. From the cheesy, porn-tastic "mood music" to the frequent but inane puzzles, *Crime Stories* strives for immersion but only achieves tedium. Unlike in *Secrets of Da Vinci*, there are hundreds of interactive objects, but clicking on them is like some form of medieval torture: death by poorly proofread text. Even the voices are terrible; because the dialogue pauses intermittently to keep pace with the subtitles, the already stilted character voices assume an odd, Shatner-esque quality.

In fact, *Crime Stories*' only redemptive factor is the extras included in the game's packaging: a mini-comic, an instruction manual resembling a detective's notepad, and a letter containing a secret code. They're a pleasant surprise, but not enough to salvage this sinking digital Titanic.

By contrast, **AGON: The Mysterious Codex** (Private Moon Studios/Everyone/★★★★½) gets everything just right. Resurrecting a long-dead style of gameplay—the kind requiring pen and paper as well as a mouse and keyboard—*AGON* creates a





[left to right] Secrets of Da Vinci: The Forgotten Manuscript, Crime Stories, AGON: The Mysterious Codex

surprisingly tense, engaging mystery about an ancient boardgame once played all over the world. Moody and intense, it gives your inner detective just what it wants: the right balance of interactivity and information, atmosphere and action. Whether you're deciphering ancient Hungarian runes or fixing a pot-bellied stove, each puzzle fits neatly and organically into its environment, adding to the story and mystery. You do not play *AGON* so much as discover it.

AGON isn't for everyone. If you've never played or didn't like *Myst*, for example, chances are that its emphasis on careful logic and detailed note-taking will frustrate you, or even prove boring. But for those select, patient few, it's nothing short of a revelation, a hidden Waldo in a crowd of bad titles. Games like *AGON* make the long search worthwhile. ■

American Conquest: Divided Nation

A step backward

★ ½

Genre Retread **Developer** GSC Gameworld
Publisher CDV **ESRB** E 10+

It takes a special kind of developer to release minor variations on the same game year after year and still keep it fresh. It takes more than a different setting; It takes tweaks to the interface, new modes, and maybe even some interesting new gameplay options.

Based on *American Conquest: Divided Nation*, GSC Gameworld isn't that kind of developer. If you've played any of the *Cossacks* games, you've played this one. It's set in mid-19th-century America, so you get to play the Blue and the Gray, and Texas and Mexico. There is little to distinguish one side from another, but distinct factions have never been a hallmark of this franchise.

The elements that made the first *Cossacks* game interesting in 2002 are still present, and that's sort of the problem. The buildings don't look as beautiful as they used to. You're already accustomed to the idea of inexhaustible resources. The troop formation mechanic that was novel but Byzantine four years ago is now familiar and needlessly complicated.

The campaigns feel new but add nothing to basic gameplay. The computer AI often masses units instead of using formations, but it has the advantage of being able to automatically handle the 600 things you need to pay attention to at any one time. *Divided Nation* is more about balancing guns and butter than any other recent real-time strategy game, but once you get the build order right, there isn't much to enjoy in the single-player game. In multiplayer, *Divided Nation* is passable but still more work than play.

Franchises are a delicate thing. With the right material and in the right hands, a series can keep improving iteration after iteration. But after the stop/start gameplay of *Cossacks II*, GSC can ill afford to keep running in place. *Divided Nation* is a step backward. It's a journey to the past in more ways than one, and not an interesting trip at all.
–Troy S. Goodfellow

[right] This riverboat has no gambling and terrible aim. [below] Confederate campsite.

CSI: 3 Dimensions of Evil

Collecting stains indefinitely

★ ★ ½

Genre TV Show-based Forensics-ness
Developer Telltale Games **Publisher** Ubisoft
ESRB Mature **Requirements** 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

[top] "The body may be a temple, but this body's temple has a bullet inside it, eh, Catherine?" [above] So much for that search warrant.

Back in the golden age of crime-solving known as the 1890s, Victorian audiences thrilled to the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, a bipolar freelance detective with a soft spot for cocaine, whose godlike powers of observation and deductive reasoning kept him always a step ahead of, and often at odds with, the British police. With the possible exception of Einstein, Holmes did more than anyone to make brainpower sexy.

CSI, crime-solving for modern audiences, tries to make chemical analysis machines sexy. Although William Petersen's Gil Grissom quotes Holmes at one point, he and the other TV characters making their unenthusiastic rounds here are a notably drab lot compared with Holmes, and much too good-looking to have jobs spraying pee stains and scrutinizing bones under microscopes. Between the robotic dialogue and creepily plastic skin textures, you'd mistake the cops for the cadavers if they weren't upright (always stationary). They're bright, though—Doc Robbins in the morgue even knows not to bring a body in until after you've noticed the wallet obscured beneath it at the crime scene.

The voicework by the suspects is slightly better, although they're generally stuck reciting annoyed exposition. It can be fun trying to guess a character's guilt just from vocal inflections. But much of the game's extra length, which is trumpeted on the box, consists of your passively listening to suspects as they describe their terrible marriages and jobs and insist they've already told you everything they know.

3 Dimensions of Evil hypes high tech, then dumbs things down so it's impossible to fail, unless listening to unskippable dialogue about mismatched fingerprints counts as failure. You can disable tooltips or hints, but there's little incentive to do so, since there are no unlockables this time. You're awarded "master" status even on the easiest settings, so long as you don't solicit hints from the TV characters always eerily stationed nearby.

Not that you'll need to. You're told which two or three tools in your kit to use when you spot a clue. You're told when an area's been searched. You're told which computer's right for each evidence fragment. You can never screw up the crime scene or make a suspect paranoid enough to actually throw away any of those incriminating items they leave lying around their offices and apartments, despite your many warnings and visits with latex gloves. You're encouraged periodically to consult your triangular "evidence trinity" as a yardstick of your progress, but in all five cases, 11th-hour "twists" render the math meaningless. There's nothing at stake; it's not like you can guess wrong.

The game offers an appealing variety of scenarios. One set in the videogame industry involves a game designer who lives in his car and puts scorpions in the beds of his colleagues, which is obviously inspired by Sid Meier. And there's a certain puritan satisfaction in exposing the lies of careless, arrogant idiots with cosmetics. Forensics is inherently intriguing, and hardcore fans of the show will most likely find the game worth a look unless graphics matter to them in any way, shape, or form. In other words, it's ideal for Mom, especially for the terrific video sequence involving a rat. **–Kelly Wand**

X-Men: The Official Game

Officially not good

★

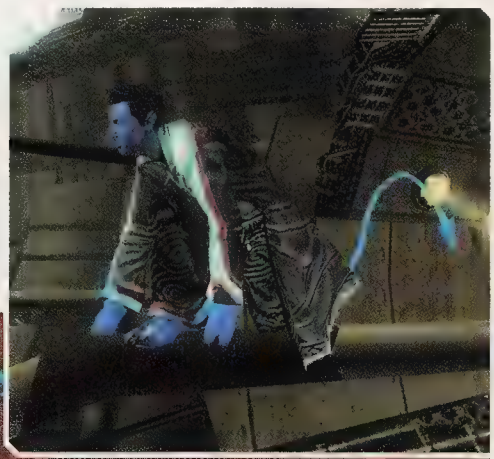
Genre Summer Movie Cash-in **Developer** Beenox
Publisher Activision **ESRB** Teen
Requirements 1.2GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

This pedestrian actioner is less an actual game than a tie-in with *X-Men III: The Last Stand*. But for some reason, it doesn't bear the movie's name. Perhaps it's because the plot is supposed to be sandwiched between this movie and the last one. Hence, Nightcrawler is featured heavily in the game but is conspicuously AWOL from the movie. (Actor Alan Cumming reportedly didn't want to deal with the long hours required for Nightcrawler's elaborate make-up, but he gamely agreed to do the voice in this tedious videogame.)

Whatever the reason for the subtitle "The Official Game," the acronym *TOG* is the perfect onomatopoeia for this flat, dull enterprise. Imagine the thud of a heavy cardboard pog in a tin can: "tog."

You alternate between controlling Nightcrawler (always a pleasure, particularly in better games like the ones Raven has been making), Wolverine, and the ice-skating Iceman, who here seems to be riding around on a gray tongue situated at the end of a winding gray turd. With the exception of a few levels customized to particular characters, everyone's job is just to punch a bunch of bad guys, take a moment to heal up, and then punch a bunch more bad guys. Then there's a boss interlude. Then a slapped-together cutscene made on the super cheap. Then more bad guys. It's all very unspectacular routine polygon smacking.

There's some superficial RPGing in the way you can allocate skill points to each character's powers, and there's some serious console-itis in the way you're expected to replay levels to find collectibles. There's virtually no effort made to adapt the controls to a PC, so make sure you've got a gamepad handy. Although the far better alternative is to just have a better game handy. **–Tom Chick**



[below] Iceman cometh. [right] Just dropped by to say "hello" before they drop me from the next movie.

Starstruck

Everyone has an opinion on the games they've played, and some post reader reviews on various websites. Since no one trusts the press, here are some "real gamer" views of some current releases, in their words, with their own unique interpretations of the English language.

Civilization IV: Warlords

"If you like Civilization games, you're going to love this expansion pack. It's as if they read your mind. Whenever you were playing Civ IV and thought 'Boy, I wish I could do...,' well, now you can." ★★★★★

Ice Age 2: The Meltdown

"My error and I opened the package, I should have read it more completely, I thought I was buying the movie, got rid of it so can't really do a review but appreciate the opportunity so am responding." ★★★★★

NFL Head Coach 2006

"I can say this much for sure: No little boys who play this game will ever want to grow up to be an NFL head coach." ★

Over the Hedge

"What a disappointment. There is nothing apart from hitting, beating, blowing things up, and thanks for teaching the kids to us 'damn' and 'dammit'... just what every mother needs...." ★

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow

"iv heard that the game is play in ship in you coomand a crew and you play capt jack what ever play the game its a littil fun" ★★★★★

The Good War That Never Ends

Red Siege: Apparently there is a desert somewhere in Russia; Flaming wreckage of the Red Army; Vehicles drawn with love, game made with apathy.

Two new World War II RTS games point in the same direction

BY TROY S. GOODFELLOW

The World War II real-time strategy game is almost a genre unto itself. It does away with base building, for the most part, and is organized in scenarios designed to test your tactical abilities. You can't count on more tanks arriving to push through that strong point, because there may be no more tanks to be had. The scenarios invariably give you a goal or series of goals to meet in order to win the right to progress to the next scenario in a very loosely designed historical campaign.

The trick is separating the good games from the merely derivative ones. If all these real-time tactical games are fundamentally the same, how can you distinguish between quality and copycat versions? Even the titles are unoriginal. Neither **Rush for Berlin** (Paradox/Teen/★★★½) nor **Moscow to Berlin: Red Siege** (Cinemaware Marquee/Teen/★★½) does enough to qualify itself as truly different, but there is a distinction to be made between "same but good" and "same."

Rush for Berlin takes the formula and tweaks it only a little. There are four campaigns, including two wildly original ones. Once you've completed the basic Western Front/Eastern Front campaigns, you are allowed to try one based on the French Resistance to Nazi occupation and one based on an alternative history where a non-Nazi Germany tries to force a negotiated peace.

Rush for Berlin also puts a time limit on your missions, so you can't just wait around while your soldiers heal or your tanks are repaired. Meeting optional goals means more time on the clock to put toward your main objectives, and extra time can come in handy. When you start a mission, you can take along extra troops if you like, but you pay a time penalty for this. *Rush for Berlin* still has a fail, fail again feel, as you stumble into disaster a half-dozen times, carefully taking note of what is around every corner. This enables your psychic soldiers to complete the mission eventually, but it does detract from the spontaneity of the enterprise. The unit count in most scenarios is fairly small, so it avoids a lot of the technical issues that plague lesser titles.

Lesser titles like *Moscow to Berlin: Red Siege*, for example. Developer Monte Cristo has made World War II games before, and they have all fit the template to some extent. *Moscow to Berlin* is almost slavish in the way it sticks to the formula and gives no sign of wanting to be anything more.

Typically, your foot soldiers are useless. Aside from their ability to avoid setting off the mines littering the battlefield, most infantry are cannon fodder. They are best used to take control of enemy vehicles, unless they happen to be specialists like sappers or scouts. Even in an urban setting like Sevastopol or Berlin, the tank is king instead of a flaming box of steel.

You command a lot of troops in your standard scenario, so pathfinding is much worse than it should be. Instead of moving through groups of infantry, something that many recent RTS games allow, your vehicles insist on taking the long way around. If there is no obvious path to the destination, they will plow down trees, run through minefields, get stuck on building corners—anything but move toward the goal in a sensible manner. It's almost funny to watch your clueless troops jostle for position while artillery drops on their heads. True, this isn't a "lasso guys and go"

Rush for Berlin: Patton does his seagull impression; Taking this gun was an optional mission but won the battle; Leading an Allied spearhead.

type of game, but it requires much more babysitting than any game of this sort should.

Neither game is especially attractive, and both have interface quirks that can make it difficult to know whether you have, in fact, activated that special power you need. *Rush for Berlin* is less interested in drawing out tiny differences between types of Panzers than *Moscow to Berlin* is; instead, it focuses on small missions that still give you a sense of progress through a larger conflict. *Moscow to Berlin* envisions you as the traffic cop of the Eastern Front, shepherding your flock of armor and infantry through narrow streets in the correct order to minimize casualties. Both cover ground we've seen too often lately, but at least *Rush for Berlin* tries something slightly new. ■

Visuals straight out of Toy Story circa 1995.

Micro Machines V4

Only children need apply

★ ★

Genre Stale Overhead Racer **Developer** Supersonic Software **Publisher** Codemasters **ESRB** Everyone **Requirements** 1.8GHz CPU; 512MB RAM; Starforce copy protection

Playing with toy cars should be a lot more entertaining than this. *Micro Machines V4* is an unimaginative action racing game that's only made worse by the inclusion of StarForce copy protection.

Using keys or a gamepad, you drive over 200 different vehicles that all control too similarly to provide much variety. Sure, there are speed differences among the cars, but those are minimal, making each new group of autos you add to your collection nothing more than a new 3D mesh to look at as you race.

This lack of vehicle variation would be less of a problem if the game lived up to the promise of racing through crazy real-world environments, but it stumbles there too. The graphics are so rudimentary that they're almost distracting, and it misses the opportunity to provide unique and exciting eye candy on and around the track. The graphic deficiency carries over to track designs, which are uninspiring. You can probably think of a million more interesting things to race around in your own home than you'll find in this game.

Multiplayer provides a bit of excitement; it sure beats the single-player game's frustrating races, where you sometimes have to get everything just right to continue, even on the easiest of three difficulties. The challenge is so uneven that you just never know when you're going to hit a wall in your progression through the game.

Even with all these problems, there's still a group of people who will enjoy *Micro Machines V4*—kids. Young boys look right past issues of difficulty, graphics, and variety and see exciting little cars rolling around awesome locations they only wish they could race in. Leave this one to them.

–David J. Long

Norm Koger's The Operational Art of War III

Cloning T-Rex

★ ★ ½

Genre War, War is Strategic... **Developer** Talonsoft
Publisher Matrix Games **ESRB** Not Rated

Back when dinosaurs walked the earth, you could find wargames on store shelves. And not fancy wargames with 3D terrain and realistic soldiers. These were hex-based wargames using NATO symbology, and they came complete with supply rules, disordered movement, and hundreds of little squares to move around.

The Operational Art of War was one of the last major wargames you could find in stores. And there were lots of versions. The original covered the World War II era; its sequel focused on postwar combat. Then we got some specialized sets, like one on the Kosovo War. All were eventually bundled together in the *Century of Warfare* pack. So calling this refit and revision *The Operational Art of War 3* is a little confusing, as is the decision to give it a new game price tag.

This is mostly an attempt to fix major bugs in the *Century of War [-fare?]* version. Making sure that anti-air weapons are useful, for example, or ensuring that units actually reconstitute when and where they're supposed to. But this is more than a $40 patch, since it includes dozens of new scenarios incorporating popular mods based on 19th-century warfare, as well as an effort to adapt Norm Koger's equipment-based combat engine to larger and larger maps. Many of the new scenarios present interesting challenges for the desktop general, with the bigger ones testing the limits of your situational awareness.

The core game itself has aged well and remains a very versatile engine, modeling conflicts as diverse as jungle warfare in Vietnam and (with some tweaking) the Battle of Waterloo. There are still a lot of bugs to be worked out, especially considering this is a bug-crushing exercise. Many of the biggest scenarios are very unstable, verging on unplayable.

Operational Art of War III ends up as a nice gesture. Re-releasing a wargame classic is a great idea, but the extras here aren't quite compelling enough to make up for the jarring technical issues. **–Troy S. Goodfellow**

Glory of the Roman Empire

Ready for a budget Roman Holiday?

★ ★ ½

Genre Budget Strategy
Developer Haemimont/Enlight Software
Publisher CDV **ESRB** E10+
Requirements 1.5GHz CPU; 256MB RAM

Last fall's *Rome* on HBO generated vast amounts of critical buzz for its vivid depiction of life, death, and sex in the Eternal City. Meanwhile, ABC's summertime miniseries *Empire*, with its more modest budget, was all but forgotten. Given that two upcoming Rome-focused PC titles, *Caesar IV* and *CivCity: Rome*, are scheduled for release later this year, *Glory of the Roman Empire* seems likely to join *Empire* in the "first but not quite impressive enough" category.

Building a city in the classical age isn't breaking new ground for simulations, and the game's developers clearly have tried to avoid the missteps of previous titles. The result is that Rome can actually be built in a day, or at least a generic and typical Roman-styled city can. There is plenty of individuality in terms of locations and settings. But, beyond the different scenery, the ancient versions of Londonium and Colonge eventually become a bit cookie cutter, albeit with a Latin flare.

The problem is that building a city requires a fairly straightforward formula. The key to each city is housing, as is to be expected. But houses need food, so you need to build farms close to the houses, and butchers or bakeries close to the farms. Of course, you need to build altars to keep the people happy, prefects to keep your town from burning down, and so on. Markets, taverns, and warehouses can help move things around a bit. Eventually you can add a few temples and even a theater or coliseum to make the people still happier, but in the process each city basically becomes just like the last. Playing an ancient urban planner would be enjoyable if there were more ways to mix it up.

The military aspect of the game is almost nonexistent, while the economy is overly simplified. The interface is streamlined, and building your town is easy enough, but everything remains generic. Worst of all, there isn't enough to make it feel Roman. Instead of getting a full-blown Roman holiday, you're left feeling like you've visited Little Italy. **–Peter Suciu**

Even mighty Rome once had the most humble of beginnings.

revisionist history

By Matthew Gallant

Return of Heracles

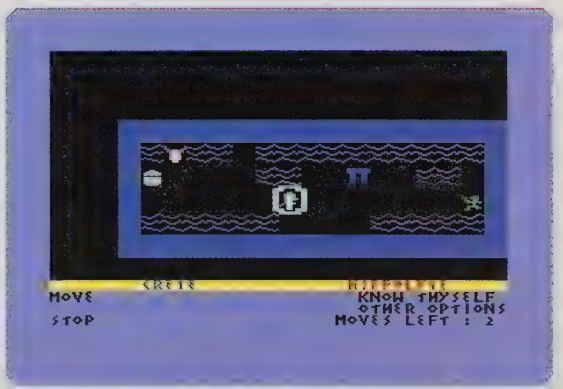
One thing *Titan Quest* lacks is Greek Mythology star power. You've got Polyphemus the cyclops, who got blinded by Odysseus and moved off his island, leaving all his cyclops friends behind to live by himself in a cave. Somewhere in between, he grew his eye back. Then there's a cameo by Chiron the centaur, and one by the voice of Zeus. That's it.

In that respect, *Titan Quest* has nothing on *Return of Heracles*, a 1983 Electronic Arts RPG by Stuart Smith for Atari 8-bit and Commodore 64 computers. In this game, you aren't some hero nouveau— you deploy and control the Edith Hamilton All-Stars to complete the 12 labors (well, some of the lame ones were replaced). Perseus, Theseus, Jason, Achilles, Odysseus, even Pegasus— 19 in all— pitch-in to slay and retrieve. A little revisionist, sure, but this was 1983; the best you could do for Mount Olympus was 10 black squares in the shape of a triangle. The excitement's got to come from somewhere, and you got it from having all those names to choose from when you started.

That said, *Titan Quest* has a more apt name. You might be on many quests, but the big one definitely involves a titan. By contrast, *Return of Heracles* isn't about Herc making a comeback after getting accidentally poisoned by his third wife Deianeira, a true genius who took advice on how to keep Herc faithful from a dying centaur that had just tried to rape her. Nope, this game actually features Hercules starting out in the crib. Not much returning happening there. Referring to Heracles by his birth name and starting him out as a baby so you wouldn't automatically pick him (or perhaps even realize whom you had picked) were nice touches.

But your tendency to get clowned by the two snakes sent to your crib by Hera wasn't. That was the thing about *Return of Heracles*. You thought being a melee character without meticulously farmed equipment in *Titan Quest* was hard. Well, it is, but *Return* is much, much stiffer. Still, if you do manage to make it out of the crib, Herc grows up fast and becomes slightly less fragile than everyone else.

"Clash of the Titans was pretty much the reason anyone would keep at a game like Return of Heracles."



"Slightly less" because, after all, this is a game where you could kill yourself by picking up treasure or even just walking into a tree. Admittedly, Greek heroes did sometimes end up dying for strange reasons. Aside from the aforementioned "marrying an unbelievably stupid woman," you've got being stabbed in the foot and my favorite, having a plank of wood from your ship fall on you. But this game was just plain mean. You never knew if that squiggly thing on the screen was going to kill you in two hits with you whiffing each time, but after a few times playing, you came to expect it.

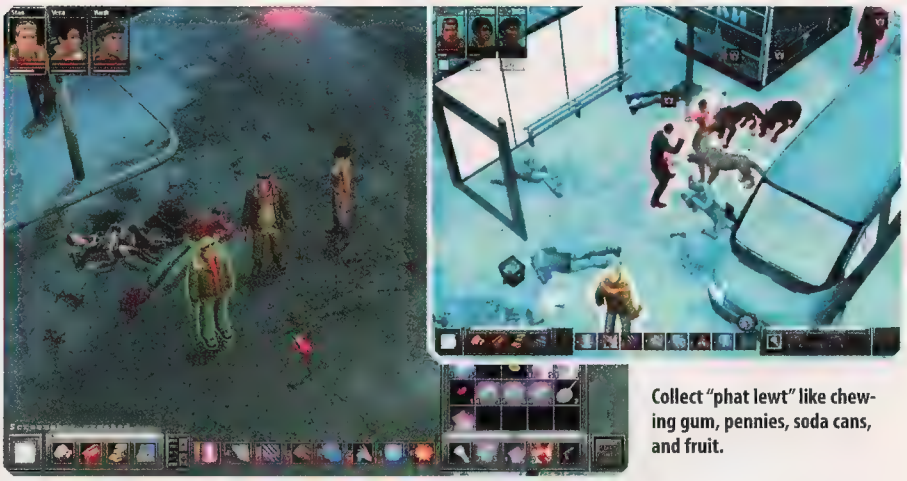
So why even play? Here's a name for you: "Bubo." If that means nothing to you, then you aren't in your thirties and/or didn't have HBO when you were a kid. *Clash of the Titans* was pretty much the reason anyone would keep at a game like *Return of Heracles*. You wanted to get home from school and drop that lunchbox featuring Harry Hamlin holding a severed head on the kitchen counter so you could get back to figuring out how to make stuff like that happen in the game. What kept bringing you back is that it would happen occasionally. Palaemon would grow into Hercules. You'd find the city of Thebes by sowing the Serpent of Ares' teeth. The less you knew about mythology, the more secrets the game held, so you didn't mind that it was a matter of luck whether you could get even half as far as you had in the game the last time. Man, you could have married Hercules. ■

Night Watch

Nochnoi Dozor nee Matrix the Buffylander

★ ½

Genre Full-Priced Budgetware **ESRB** Teen
Developer Nival Interactive **Publisher** CDV
Requirements 1GHz CPU; 256MB RAM; StarForce copy protection



Collect "phat lewt" like chewing gum, pennies, soda cans, and fruit.

Even though it's based on a series of Russian novels, the movie *Night Watch* (*Nochnoi Dozor* in its mother tongue) is a goulash of very American stuff: *The Matrix*, *Underworld*, *Highlander*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, horror movies, comic books, and music videos. But its very Soviet premise is that ancient forces of capital-G good and capital-E evil operate under the guidelines of a complicated détente, enforced by underground police forces called Night Watch and Day Watch. In Russia, even theology requires an elaborate bureaucracy.

It's a great concept for a turn-based tactical game with werewolves, vampires, and mages battling it out in modern locations, earning skill points, managing inventories, and leveling up spells. Unfortunately, the game *Night Watch* feels like something Nival Interactive created on a spare computer in the mailroom while everyone else was working on *Heroes of Might and Magic V*. It's built from a poorly implemented iteration of the *Silent Storm* engine. You get absurd rag doll physics, pedestrian spell effects, and Babel-icious localization. You also get the distinctly Russian Starforce copy protection.

There are unique bits borrowed from the movie. You meet Olga the owl girl, Tigra the tiger girl, and Geser, the head honcho of capital-G good. Flashlights and fluorescent tubes are powerful magical weapons. The concept of the Gloom (variously called Twilight or Dusk, thanks to devil-may-care translations) is loosely adapted from the movie as an alternate dimension where characters burn mana every turn in exchange for physical immunity and more powerful spells.

But these rare smart touches can't overcome the fact that the game is cheap, underdesigned, and uninteresting. Unlike in *Silent Storm*, the environments have almost no effect on battles beyond line-of-sight restrictions. The action is streamlined to the point where you're doing little more than taking turns smacking each other with magic missile variations or shapeshifter melee attacks. Sometimes you eat apples and chocolate to heal up. When you're done, you gather a bunch of junk that you can basically turn into potions. Then it's on to the next predetermined mission.

The whole thing plays out like some budgetware "Turn-Based Combat RPG for Dummies." *Nochnoi Dozor* might as well mean "No, thanks." **–Tom Chick**

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow

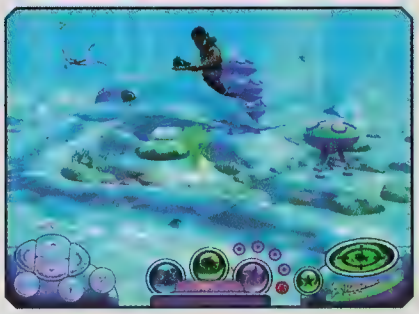
Bethesda/Teen ★½

As tedious and redundant as *Dead Man's Chest*, this cash-in distills the whole appeal of the original *Pirates of the Caribbean* into simple, repetitive, and boring button-mashing combat. It doesn't make a lot of sense, since you're often killing Captain Barbosa's undead pirates, who, if you recall, can't actually die. As far as settings go, it's Captain Jack's version of what happened in the first movie, which lets the game follow its own course. (Jack saves Elizabeth at her house? OK.) But the swordfighting action is dull and repetitive, and you can frequently break the game's scripting by doing things out of sequence. AI characters—and your companion on the levels, who can be anyone from Elizabeth to Will Turner to various minor characters—frequently stand around doing nothing. At least Johnny Depp reprises his role as Captain Jack; it's a phoned-in performance, but it's a virtual lock for a SpikeTV award. **–Steve Bauman**

Deep Sea Tycoon: Diver's Paradise

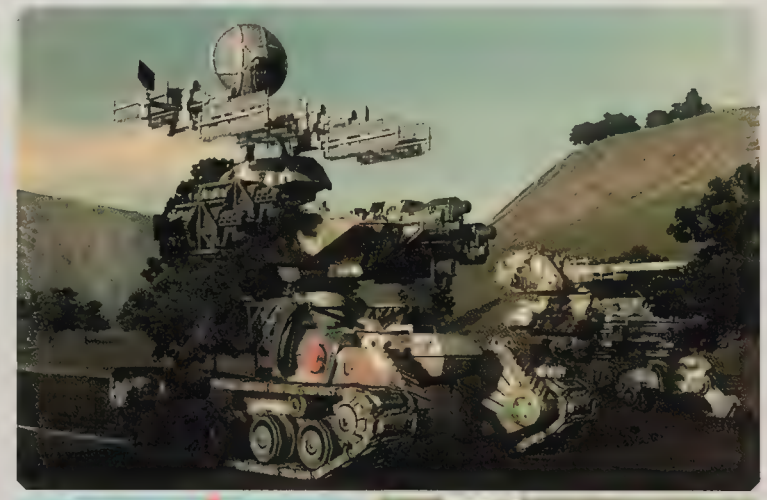
eGames/Everyone ★½

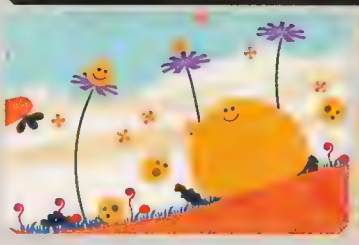
Deep Sea Tycoon lacks sharks. That's a big omission because, with no overly aggressive creatures getting in the way of your underwater theme park, there's never any danger. In fairness, this is designed for a younger audience than your typical *Tycoon* game. In fact, the game's entire message is how wonderful nature is and how we should live in peace with the creatures of the sea. The missions even say so: "Build three dolphin riders and watch how we can live together in harmony!" It's doubtful that any dolphin would actually want a human saddled to its back while the guy takes pictures of plant life. If you want an underwater world on your PC, buy a sim aquarium; if you want a *Tycoon* game, stick to zoos and roller coasters. **–William Abner**

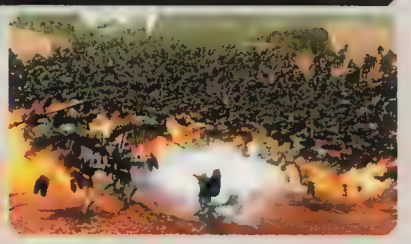


YOUR OTHER SYSTEMS BY TOM CHICK

This just in: the PC is no longer the best way to play a giant robot game. Maybe you've been noodling around with *MechWarrior 4*, now obsolete and ignored. Microsoft has handed the *MechWarrior* license to hyper kiddies, making for them the action-packed, mech-jacking, bitch-tastic, frag-a-minute *MechAssault* games. The last best hope for the slow, stately stomp of a giant robot was Capcom's expensive and disastrous *Steel Battalion*, with its monstrous forty-button controller and unsupported multiplayer support that never even worked. Okay, Sega, we're battered and poor, but we'll still see what you've got.







[clockwise from top] Chromehounds, Ninety-Nine Nights, LocoRoco

In a word, Hallelujah! As far as giant robot games go, **Chromehounds** (Sega/Teen/★★★★★) is really simple when it comes to clomping around and shooting and making pretty explosions happen. There are no special buttons. You can't power down to hide or lock your legs to roll on wheels at high speed, or toggle a switch to purge your cooling system. When it comes to actually playing, it's as simple as *Steel Battalion* was complicated.

But it has an incredible amount of depth when it comes to actually building your mech. It's like having a box of a hundred different parts, each of which has a very different effect. They can be combined a thousand different ways. Imagine LEGOs, but with a power supply and weight limit, where every LEGO has its own stats. With this much customization, you can lose yourself in the slick building subgame, snapping together pieces, carefully positioning logos or applying color schemes, and then admiring your creations. The only way to get more LEGOs is to play the persistent and dynamic online campaign, which features three races having battles on dozens of distinct maps with variable environmental conditions.

There's an incredible amount of depth in *Chromehounds'* multiplayer, which is really its only kind of -player (if you don't have Xbox Live, there's little point in having *Chromehounds*). Because of the way matches are based on capturing territory, and because you can only communicate when you're in captured territory, and because of the different kinds of mechs you can build—wheeled robots with radar dishes, slow ponderous missile slingers, aggressive toe-to-toe fighters with shotguns, standoff cannoneers, etc., etc., etc—it's all about teamwork, with combat skills playing second fiddle.

Chromehounds isn't just the most exciting giant robot game since *MechWarrior 2* opened with that famous Digital Domain cutscene; it's absolutely a reason to buy a 360 and a Live subscription.

If you've already got a 360, you might have been tempted by **Ninety-Nine Nights** (Microsoft/Mature/★★), another big summer release. It was created by the guys who did the *Kingdom Under Fire* games, which were clever strategy/action hybrids that dropped you into an RTS and let you whack and slash, *Dynasty Warriors*-style.

However, this game is light on the strategy part of the equation. It's actually pretty light on the action, as well, considering how quickly it lapses from action to tedium. It's certainly pretty and there are a few "wow, look at all the bad guys I'm beating by wildly pressing either of the attack buttons in various inadvertent combos!" moments. It's good for about twenty minutes before it becomes a dull grind and you realize you're basically playing a tech demo for a game yet to be created.

There was some public grumbling from the developers of *Gish* when **LocoRoco** (Sony/Everyone/★★★★) was announced. Both games are about the physics of cute little amorphous blobs. But *Gish* had the disadvantage of being a platformer on a platform—the PC—that didn't really do platformers. *LocoRoco* on the PSP, on the other hand, is a perfect fit. It combines simple controls (you use the shoulder buttons to tilt the world and to occasionally flick your blob into the air, letting gravity do its job) with the pop of color on the PSP's screen and the rich music you can stream from a disc. This makes *LocoRoco* yet another reason to be happy with all the money you spent on Sony's handheld. The actual gameplay is the best combination of innovation (sorry, *Gish*), music, charm, and funky artwork since *Katamari Damacy*. It's short, which keeps it from achieving a *Kirby: Canvas Curse* level of greatness, and it even gets a bit repetitive before it's over, but it's built for replaying, with plenty of room for exploration and an addictive *Incredible Machine* style subgame using the unlockables you get in the main game. Suffice to say, you'll be here for a while. ■

technicalities

by Kevin Rice

New and Improved!

Why new hardware doesn't give developers the freedom to develop their dream games

Every five years or so, the videogame industry supposedly gets reinvigorated by the release of a new console. A quote like "We haven't had the ability to make this game until now!" could come from any number of developers. There's always a race to be a launch title; a desire to be the first out of the gate; the hope that one's game is the next *Lumines* or *Super Mario 64*. And then we have to wait another five years to get the game the developer really wanted to make.

"Innovation and creativity aren't always pretty."

Developers and publishers have become used to convincing their fans that prettier and faster equals better. Consoles just have to output in HD now. We need a pair of videocards in our computer just to push 60 frames per second at 1600x1200 in the latest eye candy diversion. If it's not loud and flashy, it's crap.

Nintendo has the most innovative and revolutionary (pun intended) console coming out with the Wii. Instead of catering to the fanboy's ever-changing attitudes, the company is offering the hardcore what they really want: the classics. Not only is the Wii controller unique and completely different from every other console's offering, but Sony and Microsoft are scrambling to copy the idea. It helps that Nintendo's back library is packed with classics that many gamers love and remember fondly. But look at services like Gametap or even programs like MAME. For the most part, these games are not high tech or even mid-tech, but they are fun.

For whatever reason, developers seem to be blind to the obvious. It's not the graphics or the flash that makes a game; it's the playability, that intangible something that makes you want to play over and over again. I've been in a *Subspace* (1996) league for 10 years. I've succumbed to the stupid pleasures of *Zuma* (and its knockoff *Luxor*). I play *Call of Duty 2* with DirectX 7 enabled. My computer will handle nearly anything, and I have a big, beautiful 20-inch LCD that refreshes faster than Visine. But if I keep waiting for the "next big thing," I'll miss or forget all the great games I already have.

Think about the release of the PS2. I remember sitting huddled in the offices of *PSM*, watching demos of *Gran Turismo* ("Wow, the lights reflect off the car!") and *The Brawler* ("Well, it could turn out OK, but it looks cool!"). No one back then could imagine the games of today. Look at *Resident Evil 4* on the Gamecube; *Burnout Revenge*, *God of War*, or *Shadow of the Colossus* on the PS2; or any number of late-generation Xbox games (*Halo 2* comes to mind). Nowadays *Oblivion* on an Xbox 360 is beautiful, and upcoming titles like *Army of Two* look downright photographic.

But that's not the point. Innovation and creativity aren't always pretty. You can't program addiction, regardless of how many bells and whistles (and Surgeon General's warnings) you put into it. Innovation is a bizarre, indefinable amalgamation of passion, creativity, and Mountain Dew. It's not something that can be taught, hired, or otherwise paid for (regardless of whether EA bought Criterion simply for the *Burnout* series and the middleware).

In this situation, PC developers have their cake and eat it too. For under $1,000 (or much less), independent PC developers have absolute control over their destinies. Games like *Mind Rover* and *Darwinia* simply aren't possible in the licensed, big-budgeted world of the console. I'm still amazed that *Rez* made it to the PS2 (and yes, the Dreamcast first).

Subspace is a top-down shooter with 8-bit graphics and a group of players more hardcore than you can imagine. (Google it.) It's not very pretty, and those that don't know how to play it call it online *Asteroids*. But man, the innovation. It was so far ahead of its time that 10 years ago, most didn't know what to make of it. I should note that the designer and programmer of that game are now both at Sony Online Entertainment making sure everyone gets their *EverQuest II* expansion packs.

The PC has many bizarre, out-there games that are often years ahead of their time. It's not because they're pretty, glitzy, or loud. It's because true innovation has little to do with the hardware; it's all in the hands of the developer. Yes, the new consoles are either out or just about out, and there's always a new processor just around the corner to match that shiny, new videocard. However, like a car collector, remember that the newest and fastest isn't always the best. ■

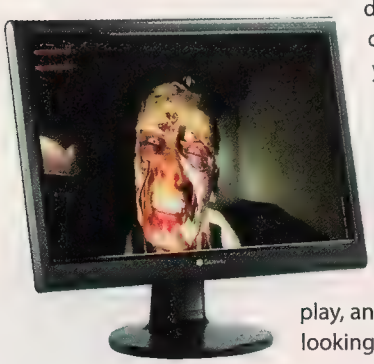
LCM-22w2

Westinghouse/$439 ★ ★ ★ ★ ½

Westinghouse has made something of a name for itself as a provider of inexpensive LCD TV displays. Its monitor line hasn't gotten much attention, but the LCM-22w2 is certainly worthy: It's a 22-inch widescreen display with a native resolution of 1680x1050 that will only set you back $499. It looks cheap, with very plastic-y plastic on the back, though from the front it looks like a normal, slightly boring display. While it's a bit weird to see the Westinghouse "W" on both your monitor and your refrigerator, who really cares? The picture quality is good, with some banding and subdued yet rich color, a 700:1 contrast, and a 5ms response time. It also has multiple inputs: DVI, VGA, component, S-Video, and composite. Most importantly, it's a 22-inch display that costs about the same as a high-end 20-inch model. If that doesn't get your attention, well… you probably already paid twice as much for a 23- or 24-inch display. **–Steve Bauman**

FPD1975W Gateway/$269 ★ ★ ★ ★

Now that 20-inch LCDs are regularly appearing for under $400, 19-inch displays aren't that exciting anymore. Gateway's 19-inch FPD1975W is noteworthy for one reason: It's a widescreen display. At $269, it's also inexpensive, though the cost-cutting does have some downsides. It doesn't come with a DVI cable, and the default base is, er, basic, with no adjustments. For $70, you can get one that offers USB 2.0 ports and all of the advanced adjustments—rotate, pivot, etc.—of its big brother, the superb 21-inch FPD2185 (which is now only $500). It also shares most of the FPD2185's features, like superb picture quality, HDCP (high-def copy protection) support, 8ms response, 700:1 contrast, and attractive looks. Its native resolution of 1440x900 is a perfect match for the size of the display, and it's an excellent choice for budget-conscious gamers looking for some inexpensive widescreen gaming. **–SB**



Krait Razer/$39.99 ★ ★ ★

According to its box, the Krait is "Optimized for Real-time Strategy and MMOG Gamers." What exactly does that mean? Apparently, people who play those games have no need for the extra side buttons provided by Razer's other excellent mouse controllers. Basically, the Krait is a low-cost version of Razer's Sidewinder and Diamondback models, retaining their good looks, solid design, precision (1600DPI), and geeked-out driver interface panel, while dispensing with a few extra features. Although RTS players will miss the extra buttons, MMO players probably won't. But everyone will miss those extra side buttons in Windows, particularly when you want to go "back" from one Web page to a previous one. Forget gaming; isn't that what those buttons are really for? **–SB**

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: You didn't give any benchmarks in your article on Intel's new Conroe/Core 2 Duo technology in the September issue. So, how does it perform?

–Rich Harrison

A: Because of an embargo, we couldn't print our benchmarks. However, our tests show the same thing everyone else's do: The Core 2 Duo processors are killer. The fastest, the 2.93GHz Core 2 Extreme X6800, is faster and more efficient than the Athlon FX-62 at the same price. The $500 2.67GHz E6700 is also as fast as the FX-62 in most tests. And both chips consume less power and generate less heat. Intel for the win.

However, there's no reason to dismiss AMD. You're not getting a second-rate processor if you go with an Athlon; they're still incredibly fast. Game performance is more complicated than the formula "Get a faster CPU, see better performance." For most games, your videocard is your biggest bottleneck, not your processor. (Exceptions to this principle include real-time strategy games, which can see a nice improvement with a faster CPU.) So you're still better off saving some money on your CPU and putting it into video.

Now, we can recommend any Core 2 Duo CPU as well as any Athlons. Welcome back, Intel.

Q: Is there a way to make my LCD monitor a TV? What components would I need?

–Aaron Thomas

A: If your LCD has component, composite, or S-Video inputs, you're already good to go. If not, you either need a TV tuner or video capture card, both of which will let you watch TV on your desktop, or a converter box that will bring the signal directly to your LCD. You're looking at $30 to $120 in costs, and a big shock when you see just how crappy cable looks on a high-resolution display.

Go for the Glow

Dell's new **XPS M1710** lights up the performance charts, at a cost BY STEVE BAUMAN

★ ★ ★ ★ **Manufacturer** Dell **MSRP** $3305

"Oooh, it glows. I want it."

That's typically the first reaction to Dell's new XPS notebook, the M1710. It emits a red glow from the XPS logo on the cover, plus from the sides and the front speakers. Even if you think it's kind of goofy to have a glow-in-the-dark laptop, you have to admit it looks pretty cool.

Once you get past the glowing, the second question is "How much does it cost?"

At that point, the conversation stops, and jaws drop. At just over 3,000 bucks, this isn't a cheap laptop. In fact, for that kind of money, it better be God's own laptop.

For the most part, it could be. This is an extremely powerful machine, rivaling high-end desktops when it comes to performance. The test system featured an Intel Core Duo T2600 and a 512MB NVIDIA 7900GTX Go powering a 1920×1200 resolution 17-inch display. (Dell will be replacing the T2600 with Intel's new Core 2 Duo-based processors in August.) The videocard is faster than most desktop cards; in fact, there's little difference between the mobile chip and its desktop brother. In all benchmarks, it smokes every previous Core Duo-based laptop we've tested.

That power comes at a cost, however. It's a relatively heavy machine, tipping the scales at nearly nine pounds (which puts it above other Core Duo laptops but under its cousins from Dell-owned Alienware). While the large screen looks gorgeous, its 1920×1200 resolution is too high for a 17-inch display. Dell bumps up the font size to offset the microscopically sized pixels, but "large fonts" can freak out some Windows software. Finally, while the 7900GTX Go chipset is powerful enough to drive most current games at the display's native resolution, it's unlikely to keep that up for too long. As soon as it starts to wheeze, you'll need to drop to nonnative resolutions like 1680×1050 or 1440×900, which aren't ideal.

However, you don't buy a laptop to run the games of tomorrow. For today's, this one has more than enough power.

Dell also includes a nifty feature called Media Direct with all of its laptops. When the machine is off, hitting the Media Direct button quickly launches a cut-down, embedded version of Windows that uses less power and is designed to operate CyberLink's Media Center-style software for playing DVDs, videos, and music and displaying pictures. And this machine needs it, because its high-end video will suck your battery dry.

The XPS M1710 is one of the better no-compromise machines on the market, but that comes at a pretty price. There are other machines with the same videocard and a lower-resolution screen for almost half the cost, though few of those machines are quite as brash looking. The XPS stands out, and anyone looking for a top-of-the-line machine will find its combination of sporty good looks and serious performance hard to beat. ■

BENCHMARKS

PCMark05	
PC Mark	5058
CPU	5049
Memory	2572
HDD	3147
3DMark 05	
1024×768	7282
1600×1200	5136
1920×1200	4675
3DMark06	
1024×768	5230
1600×1200	3729
1920×1200	3396
F.E.A.R	
1024×768	73
1600×1200	38
1920×1200	N/A

All tests run with 4X AA/8X AF except 3DMark06, which had AA turned off.

The Specs 2.16GHz Intel Core Duo Processor T2600; 2GB 667MHz DDR2 RAM; NVIDIA 7900GTX Go 512MB; 17-inch UltraSharp display (1920×1200 resolution); Windows XP Media Center Edition; 80GB 7200RPM SATA drive; 8X DVD burner; Wireless/Ethernet; 6 USB 2.0; 5-in-1 card reader; DVI-D, VGA, and S-Video output; 1.75 inches thick; 8.75 pounds (with battery)

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road to nowhere

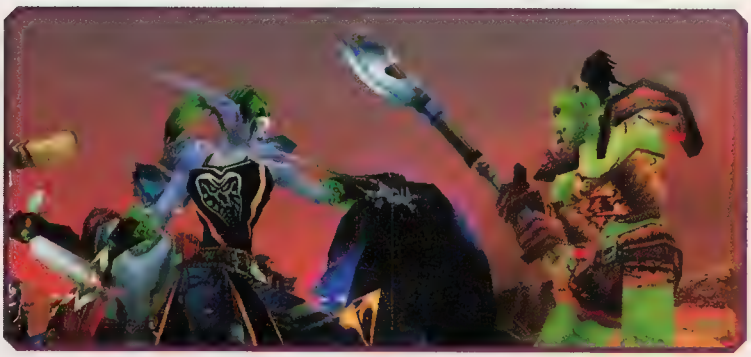
by Cindy Yans

Dirt Nap

PvP gameplay—it hurts so goodly

After nine hours of group questing, enough was enough. All eight of us decided to get some sleep and then just duo or solo the final two quest steps at our leisure: kill four Daubentonia Madagascariensises and two Pregnant Walleroos. No prob. Piece of cake.

The next day, my companion and I set out to do just that. We flew toward the landing area closest to our final destination, perhaps a few hundred feet away. He arrived before me and shouted, "Don't come here. Jump before you get here.



"We love PvP because suddenly there's this atmosphere that's chaotic, unpredictable, and tense."

Seriously. I mean it." And he died. But it was too late. I was too close. When I landed, enemy player characters were there to meet me—eight of them to my one—and they beat the tar out of me and left me for dead.

"Okay," I said my partner. "Rez to the place where we started, jump early, and get your ass to the zone as fast as you can. Ready? Go!" So we did. And we jumped. And he made it. And I was snared, rooted, stunned, frozen, burned, electrocuted, and beaten down once again. Same scenario, same players. I lay there for a while, just a few steps from the gate, tried again, this time getting within footsteps of the zone, where my eight "friends" were still waiting, and guess what? Sigh. Eventually, I received a message from a kind passerby, asking if I would like to allow him to rez me right there where I lay. I thanked him, accepted, ran, and finally, finally… reached the destination. "I made it!" I proclaimed happily, running to join my partner. He was dead. After a number of additional attempts, all with the same result, we gave up on that particular goal and set out to find another pursuit.

So, let me get this straight. I abandoned the high-level characters and friends I had made on another server over the course of many months to switch to a PvP area? For this? Was I nuts? On a PvE server, we'd have wiped out both the Daubentonias and the Walleroos in 10 minutes, gotten the quest rewards, and run merrily off again, without frustration, without losing experience, without losing gold and items. It's just that, well, there's something intriguing about the whole PvP thing. And I never thought I'd hear myself saying that.

In the early days of *Ultima Online* griefing made me ill. I didn't like it, I didn't understand it, and I certainly didn't partake in it. Killing other players? That's what *Counter-Strike* is for. Free-for-all PvP is a breeding ground for griefers. Take *World of WarCraft*'s "honorable kill" system (please). For griefers, it doesn't matter if they lose honor. It only matters if they spoil the game for others, because, bottom line, that's what griefers do. But that's just it. PvP shouldn't have to spoil the game for others. If it's well implemented (and it's been improving since *Ultima*), it can be a means to an end just as much as cooperative play against the AI.

A lot of people have told me that they don't like PvP because it plays out too much like real-world violence. It's somehow ignoble. "It gets in the way of the game?" Oh, I see. The game is a huge puzzle to be solved. How to handle the mobs, what places to go, where you need to stand—like a large game of chess in which you know the relationships, how the pieces move, and how it generally plays out. In a PvP environment, all that goes out the window. People hate it because, instead of something they can take charge of, there's suddenly this atmosphere that's chaotic, unpredictable, and tense. And those of us who love it? We love it because suddenly there's this atmosphere that's chaotic, unpredictable, and tense.

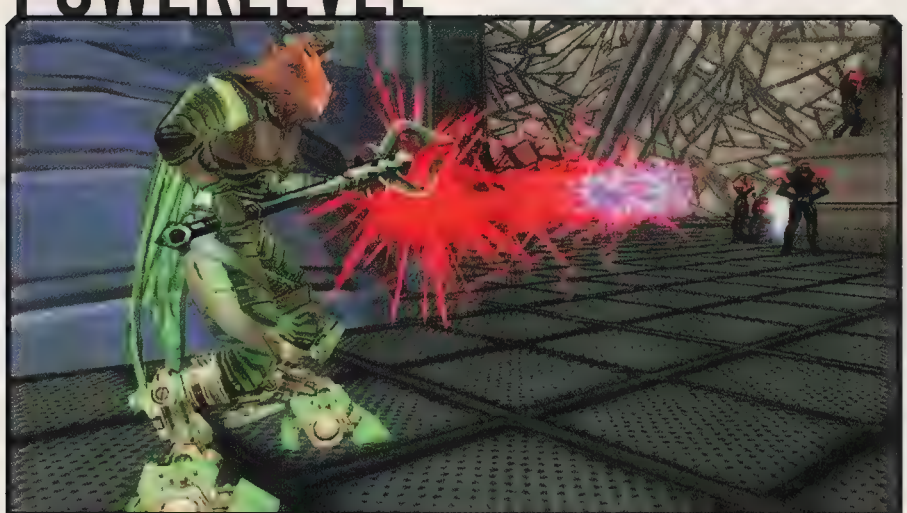
When mobs kill you, they just rubber-band back to their home position and stand there in ambient animation. Humans, though? They hump your corpse, piss on you, type "/spit," chicken dance in circles around you, perform other foul emotes, and then phone home to tell their friends what happened. Oh, and they likely take a screenshot of the bitter end and post it on the game's forum. (Ragnaros, to my knowledge, has never posted a screenshot of the big raid he just wiped.) This kind of stuff raises more adrenaline than just figuring out how to solve the dev's situational puzzle. Revenge can be so sweet.

Inherently simple things like the "kill these two mobs" scenario become impossible. On *World of WarCraft* PvP servers, it's not enough to organize a 40-person raid for Molten Core. You also have to get them into Molten core—often through full scale PvP encounters, where you have no idea how many people will die, where they'll fall, what sort of armor damage they'll take. It's an entirely different dynamic. And in *EverQuest II* (where I'm spending a lot of time at present), it's the dynamism that I like best. It's the dealing with the unexpected and successfully overcoming it that feels really, really great. And it is the only thing players cannot truly master—no matter how good they are. ■

MOBS & FRIENDS

"I knew full well that tickling her was wrong. It's just that there are so many... opportunities. I'm afraid she overreacted just a bit."

POWERLEVEL



Sally Ports Alternate escape mechanism

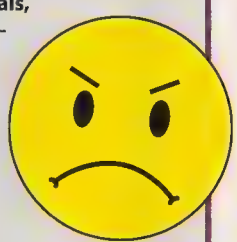
In *City of Heroes* and *City of Villains* PvP, too many of the enemy camping your base can be an issue. If you find that there is a blocking force waiting at your base, use the alternate way out. Each base is set up with a back door, or sally port. These are located on the bottom-most level of the bases across from the main portal. Using one of these doors will take you to one of five randomly picked exits. This is a quick way to get past the enemy but it's not secured, so be careful.

MMOCABULARY

Farming Staying at a specific location in the hope that a specific monster will spawn and drop a particular item or any item of value, or remaining in a general area continuously collecting all available resources. In certain circles, people farm items, sell them for in-game currency, and then resell the currency for real-world cash.

Bind This is to associate your character with a particular location. The default one is automatic, and there is usually a means to change it as you play. Depending on the game, you return to that location either when you log in, when you actively choose to return, or when your character dies. The location is referred to as your current "bind point," as in "Where are you bound?" "Oh crap, halfway across the planet."

Rollback Developers' (and some players') worst nightmare. Since every aspect of the gameworld is generally only saved at intervals, everything that happens in between is not information that's continuously available. If something Really Bad goes wrong, developers may be called upon to restore the game to one of its save points, "rolling back" players' possessions, their whereabouts, their levels, their stats, etc. to the state they were in at that point in time. Like, you played 15 hours yesterday and gained four levels? Tough.



BoP Stands for "bind on pickup" and refers to an item that, once someone collects it, can only be used by that player. It cannot be given, traded, or sold to someone else. While some games allow sale of these items to NPC merchants or vendors, they're usually not worth very much, generally to prevent farming of said item.

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MASSIVE

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Farmers for Hire

[W]hen *World of WarCraft* player Frank Valhuerdi's guild recruited a Chinese gold farmer as a joke, they got more than they bargained for. Instead of a novelty, they wound up with a real friend, one who could use their help. The episode provided the guild with a fascinating education about the game's place in the life of a farmer, and a farmer's place in the life of a guild.

Valhuerdi's guild's new recruit had to meet a quota of 300 gold a day, working a 12-hour shift. "He was about 20 years old, living in China," Valhuerdi says. "He absolutely hated his job, but said he needed it to get through college. It didn't leave him much time to study, go to school, eat, sleep, or really do anything else."

The guild helped with his English—including important phrases like "word up, niggas"—and took him on the occasional raid to break the monotony. "It was almost like humanitarian work," Valhuerdi says.

What Valhuerdi's guild discovered was that their new recruit was not the cutthroat capitalist that most farmers are believed to be, but just a guy trying to improve his lot in life. "He explained that, as much as he hated grinding in front of his computer for 12 hours a day, working similar shifts in a factory for a lot less money would have been even worse."

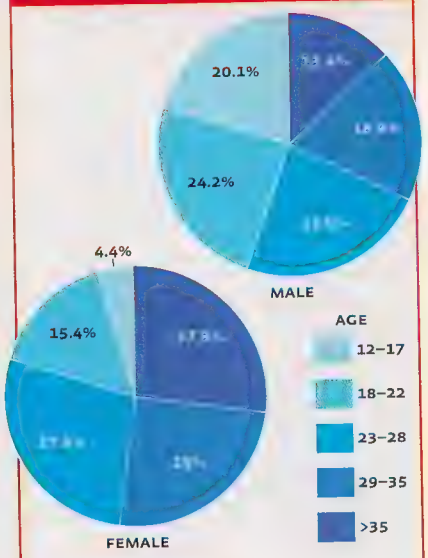
In the end, though, the farmer disappeared. "A new guy who spoke no English was playing the account about a week later," says Valhuerdi. "It seems that his boss found out what was going on and fired him, then recalled the account."

Why Are You Still Playing THE SIMS ONLINE?

I've met so many fabulous and nice people that have helped me and have made me laugh. Some people call this a chatroom, but it's way more than that; we can set our own long-term and short-term goals that we can accomplish or destroy.

"The community holds contests, games, and fun activities. They play, live with you at all times, and they are always around. They will help you if you're in need, and everyone will welcome and accept you." –JENNIFER JAMES TC

[MMOgraphics]



Men are from Orgrimmar, women are from Darnassus. No matter how you slice it, the gender split plays a huge part in determining how any product—including non-games—will lean.

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Guild Profile: Amazon Basin

[J]im Grosbach tries hard not to approach his role as guildmaster in the same way he approaches his real-life job. Sometimes, he's even successful.

"In business, as a manager, I have goals and have to get buy-in from my employees," says Grosbach, a 35-year-old engineer with two teen kids. "In a guild, I'm here to ensure an environment where gamers can meet their own goals. To regard the players as people to be managed, that's a big mistake."

Grosbach is one of several guildmasters who help to operate Amazon Basin, a 10,000-character guild that spans five games: *World of WarCraft*, *Diablo II*, *Star Wars: Galaxies*, *Guild Wars*, and the forthcoming *Hellgate: London*.

Grosbach estimates that he spends about 15-20 hours a week on official guild business, and that doesn't include any actual gaming time. The lion's share involves being an all-purpose sounding board.

"Eighty percent of the time, the players just want someone to listen to them and take them seriously," says the soft-spoken Grosbach. "I can provide that."

[Free Beta Love]

Everyone loves free stuff. This is one of the reasons pre-release, free-to-play beta testing is so popular, but we also view it as our reward for caring about these games before they come out.

Now that you've been accepted into a beta, what do you do? Here are a few suggestions:

Lower Your Expectations

Seriously, this is incomplete software: It will crash, it will be unbalanced, it will be unavailable, it will be horribly broken, and its performance will suck. Remember, you're there to help make it better.

Do Your Job

Being a real beta tester is boring. You're playing the same things over and over again. So, in the spirit of role-playing, pretend that you're the best tester. Experience the thrills of submitting detailed bug reports. Work it.

Don't Get Attached

You're not there to power level a character; you're there to try a bunch of stuff and see if it works. Create as many characters as you can, but keep in mind that they will be wiped. Frequently.

Keep Your Forum Posts Civil

Opening each forum post with "The developers are obviously idiots" isn't particularly helpful. Suggestions are useful; insults, not so much.

Don't Be a Putz

While it may make you the cool kid on the forums to be "that guy" in the beta who bitches about every crash and bug and what a disaster the game is, it also makes you a dick.

[Why Did You Do That?]

Why did you give only one hearthstone to each World of WarCraft character?

Rob Pardo, vice president of game design for Blizzard: "In beta, there was a time where, when you died, you did not turn into a ghost but were teleported to your home bind point with resurrection sickness. People would exploit this system to teleport home when they completed quests. We went redesigned our death system but decided to give players a limited ability to teleport home occasionally to complete quests."

D-Link DGL-4100/4300

Finally, a router that places gaming at the forefront. It has a number of built-in profiles for games, with the ports they need opened. The 4100 is a wired router with four gigabit Ethernet ports, while the 4300 is a super-solid 10/100 router with 802.11g/802.11b and 108Mbps wireless. Also in its favor: blue lights. Everything looks cooler with blue lights. **($129/$149)**

out of the box

by Brett Todd

Never-Ending Neverwinter Nights

Pleading for a more-of-the-same sequel with mod appeal

I usually love sequels to games that I like. Yeah, I know, stop the presses. I also love naked women, beer, and chocolate cake. Usually in that order, though I'm always up for some surprises.

Right now I have to keep reminding myself of the sequel-lovin' facts, however, because I am absolutely, positively dreading the fast-approaching October release of *Neverwinter Nights 2*. While I'm usually bringing the game industry to wrack and ruin with my clamoring for More of the Same ASAP Dammit, in this case I want to stop time and hold onto the original for as long as I can.

"Cleaning a Camaro with a toothbrush is more thrill-packed than the out-of-the-box campaign"

I'm still surprised to be typing those words. I despised *Neverwinter Nights* when BioWare released it in 2002. The blocky 3D graphics of the Aurora engine often looked like something an orc upchucked after snacking on Legos. Cleaning a Camaro with a toothbrush is more thrill-packed than the out-of-the-box campaign (I unfortunately discovered this first-hand after my wife smoked a Blue Jay on the highway last summer). And the whole solo adventurer approach left me cold after years of grooving on the party-based action of the *Baldur's Gate* franchise.

But something happened in 2004. During an RPG drought, I installed it again and started messing around with first the default campaign (still didn't take), then the two retail expansions (finished them), and then the freebie modules that are found primarily online at the Neverwinter Vault (nwvault.ign.com). I've now had the game installed for the better part of three years and have knocked off, on average, about one user-made module per month, playing both solo and over my network with a friend I've been *D&D* geeking with since high school.

And I'm afraid that the sequel will bring the curtain down on my never-ending *Neverwinter Nights* this fall. Even though I'm reasonably sure that diehards will continue to make modules for the original, the lure of the new will no doubt siphon off a lot of the fanbase. We are talking about a game that has just marked its fourth birthday, after all. The writing is on the wall, and it's been spraypainted in big black letters.

Also, I'm concerned about the break between the two games. Obsidian has been handed the reins for the sequel now that BioWare has stepped back from its *D&D* duties to focus on projects like *Dragon Age*, *Mass Effect*, and that mysterious MMO under way down in Austin. This doesn't bode well for those of us who want a seamless transition between games.

I'm pretty sure that Obsidian will provide a great-looking game, thanks to the new Electron renderer, with a much-improved campaign (it could hardly be worse than the snoozefest in the original game). But I'm not sold on the new editing tools. Since I'm hearing a lot about how they will be "more powerful" than those in the original, I'm afraid that they're going to be too complex for average users to get comfortable with. Far too many games these days are proving to be absolute bears, and as a result we're seeing a decline in modding for every graphically intense game that isn't *Half-Life 2* or *Oblivion*.

Even though ease of use is the main reason why there are almost 10,000 modules at the Neverwinter Vault, I'm not getting the sense that Obsidian designers like J.E. Sawyer and Chris Avellone have a lot of commitment to maintaining this level of user-friendliness for the sequel. The DM client has already been dropped from the game discs and is instead being promised for online release on the same day the game hits stores (which seems like a strange decision, unless someone at Obsidian is hedging bets on the client's being finished by launch day).

Interviews discuss what users will be able to do with the editor, but they never get into any serious specifics of how. This silence contrasts with the press leading up to the release of the original; back in 2001, BioWare couldn't shut up when it came to discussing the Aurora Toolkit. Instead, I've read nothing but vague references to cool new trees and the possibility of including video tutorials to get users up to speed with the editor. All coverage of the game seems to center on the use of the 3.5 rules for *D&D*, replacing henchmen with companions, and on the emphasis on the single-player storyline. This preoccupation doesn't inspire confidence that the devs are on the right track, or even that they understand why the original remains such a huge hit with modders.

I hope that I'm dooming and glooming here. As an old-school *D&D* dork who typically needs a whiff of Gygax to really enjoy an RPG (it's a curse), I want and need *Neverwinter Nights 2* to be an absolute smash. At the same time, I don't want to give up what I've got right now with the original. So I think Obsidian will have to drag me into the future this time, kicking and screaming. ■

Cleopatra and the Society of Architects

Designers Bruno Cathala and Ludovic Maublanc **Publisher** Days of Wonder **Players** 2-5 **Playing time** 60 Minutes **MSRP** $50 **Rating** ★★★★½

Prop games like *Cleopatra and the Society of Architects* don't get a lot of respect. Cool pieces like the ones included here generally consign them to a ghetto filled with childish extravaganzas like *Mouse Trap*.

But this isn't a kiddie game. Like most Days of Wonder releases, *Cleopatra* combines great production values with an offbeat setting and an innovative set of rules. This is still a casual game, but one with a surprising amount of fast-paced action that makes it extremely addictive. Gameplay centers on competing to build the most valuable pieces of the legendary Egyptian temptress's plastic palace. To do so, each turn you either visit the market and draw resource cards or visit the quarry and play cards to erect part of the palace.

Building isn't straightforward, though. Cards are displayed face up and face down in stacks called market stalls. Players take entire stacks instead of peeling single cards off the top, which can be a problem, as you suffer penalties with more than 10 cards in your hand. Replenishment cards can be distributed among stalls however the drawing player sees fit, so you can mess with your rivals. Shortcuts can be taken with tainted cards featuring extra resources or crooked characters, but each time you use one, you earn an amulet that goes into your pyramid of corruption. This isn't good, because Cleo counts them at the end of the game and tosses the biggest offender to the crocodiles as a sacrifice to the god Sobek.

Although the whole process seems convoluted, in practice it flows quickly. Essentially, you try to keep close to the maximum number of cards, distribute good drawn cards to screw over rivals, and be corrupt enough to win but not so corrupt that you get turned into croc vittles. Quick thinking is key, because available resources change so much from turn to turn that you can't do any long-range planning.

Family games don't get any better than *Cleopatra and the Society of Architects*. Don't let the toys in the box fool you into thinking that this is just another kiddie game. There's a tremendous amount of depth here. –Brett Todd

SPOTLIGHT: FORTRESS FOREVER

So is anyone still interested in *Team Fortress 2*? Valve apparently thinks so, judging by the recent surprise announcement that the long-long-long-in-development multiplayer shooter is being prepped for release with *Half-Life 2: Episode 2*.

But you may not have to wait that long. Fortress Forever (fortress-forever.com) is aiming to bring the Team Fortress Classic (TFC) experience to the Source engine. A beta version should be available at the official website before this magazine hits store shelves.

Do the bunny-hop!

Even in prerelease state, Fortress Forever looks awfully good. It appears to be a spiritual sequel to TFC in that it maintains the quick pace of the original but updates just about everything else. Player models are highly detailed, right down to the jowls on the Winston Churchill lookalike Civilian. There should be better physics, more detailed maps, and more devastating weapons. At the same time, many maps from the original game are being remade, and the original 10 classes are being ported over pretty much intact.

Gameplay will not feature any radical changes. Bunny-hopping will be back and bouncier than ever, but the developers aren't unconditionally embracing the Source engine's well-known "fun with physics" philosophy. The gravity gun, for instance, won't be included, since the devs believe it would alter the basic concepts of TFC beyond recognition.

Best of all, the beta of Fortress Forever is expected to be released feature- and map-complete. While there will be regular updates based on player feedback and bug reports, all of the core elements of the mod will be present from day one. Start practicing that bunny-hop. **–Brett Todd**

MODSQUADS

by Brett Todd

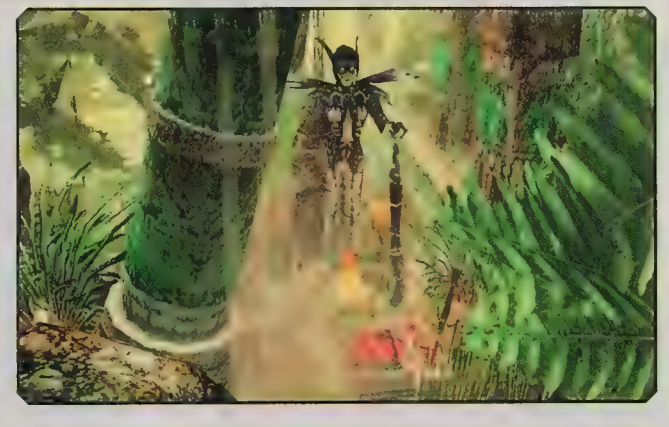
Good Intentions

Arguably the latest and greatest of the many *Battlefield 2* enhancement mods to hit the Net, Allied Intent features the usual array of modern military hardware made more realistic. Version .2 comes crammed with 9 new maps, 10 tweaked *BF 2* maps, new jet fighters like the F-16 and Mig 21, and a pile of nifty gear, like tear-gas grenades and the XM8 automatic rifle. It also features a pile of soldier and vehicle reskins, support for multiple languages, and other amenities not commonly found in these *BF 2* grab bags. **alliedintent.com**

[above] Allied Intent [below] Underworld: The Legend of Nephthys

Silence is Golden

The Source engine goes to space in Eternal Silence, an upcoming multiplayer mod that blends first-person shooting with spaceship combat. The focus will be on deep-space dogfights between teams representing the United Terran Forces and the Neo Galactic Militia, although you will also be able to infiltrate enemy ships and shoot up foes face to face. The mod even looks to have a bit of *Battlecruiser 3000* in it: The devs are promising that you will have control of the operating systems of large ships and will be able to issue plans of attack and give orders to fighters and bombers. As of mid-July, the mod was "feature frozen" to allow the development team to focus on refining existing gameplay elements and getting a playable build in the hot little hands of gamers in the next couple of months. So, if all goes well, you could be blasting your way around the cold vacuum of space by the time you read these words. **eternal-silence.net**



Source for Forts

One of the most innovative mods for the Source engine has just gotten better. SourceForts, a team-based multiplayer total conversion where human rebels and the combine play Capture the Flag in and around fortresses that they build themselves, has just been rereleased in a spanking new version 1.9.1. This latest edition of the game refurbishes, well, pretty much everything. All the player classes have been rebalanced, and class limits have been put in place for individual matches. The Builder class has been renamed Engineer and given the nifty abilities to heal units and use building blocks as shields. Five new maps have been added, along with glitz like a new intro movie, opening menus, and music on the main screen. Finally, the devs have stamped on a number of crash bugs, including a pesky issue that would sometimes cause players to spawn in their enemy's base. **sourcefortsmod.com**

Down in the Underground

A focus on role-playing, along with all-new levels, special effects, and mythology, highlights cryptiKarma's Underworld: The Legend of Nephthys, a total conversion for *WarCraft III* and the *Frozen Throne* expansion. The first in a planned three-part series of episodes dealing with mystical titans, an age-old conflict among gods, and ancient ruins should be available online by the time you read this. The three-year-old original game is being overhauled with an intricate design that turns the RTS into an RPG, with lots of traditional hacking, slashing, and questing along the lines of the *Baldur's Gate* series. The look of the mod will be very different, too, because all of the textures from the four-year-old original game are being replaced with high-resolution counterparts that give everything more of a modern sheen. New special effects for spells and the like are also being added. **cryptikarma.com**

ALT.GAMES by Troy S. Goodfellow

1 Wild Earth Photo Safari

Super X Studios

The natural beauty of the African savannah is the setting for this edutainment game. You are a photographer for a nature magazine, charged with taking pictures that your editor needs for the next issue. *Wild Earth* was one of the five finalists for the Seumas McNally Grand Prize at the 2006 Independent Games Festival, and it's not hard to see why. As you walk across the beautifully rendered plains, snapping shots to complete your missions, your computer companions fill your mind with typical wild kingdom information. It isn't very difficult but is charming in a "Can you spot the termite mound?" kind of way.

wildearthgame.com

2 Cloud Cloud Team

Cloud is another prize winner. This puzzle/arcade game captured one of the Student Showcase awards at the 2006 IGF, along with honors from other outlets. It casts you in the role of an invalid boy who dreams about flying among the clouds. You control the boy and try to catch as many clouds as you can. The controls can be a little erratic, but this is forgivable, given that neither clouds nor dreams are known for being predictable. *Cloud* presents an enchanting world and demonstrates how simplicity and creativity often go hand in hand.

intihuatani.usc.edu/cloud

3 Mighty Rodent Jagged Blade Games

Of course, sometimes you just want to blow things up. And maybe sometimes you want to be giant vermin. *Mighty Rodent* is low on art but high on action as you rush a giant hamster named Sgt. Fluffles through level after level of alien attackers. It's generous with power-ups, and the range of boss monsters is quite impressive for a minor arcade game. The screen can look chaotic at times, but you receive little warnings when very bad things are about to happen. Like when a giant springy-boot falls from the sky and bounces on your head.

jaggedbladesoft.com/mightyrodent

MODBYTES

First-person shooter/real-time strategy hybrid Iron Grip: The Oppression is now in beta testing. The Source engine mod from Isotx (isotx.com) should be ready for release by this fall, which is good news for the many fans looking forward to sampling its blend of shooting and strategy. One player takes control of the Rahmos, a totalitarian future government, and commands units in traditional RTS style, while opponents guide Resistance soldiers in FPS mode. The style of play looks akin to urban guerilla warfare, with rag-tag rebels taking on a vastly superior army in ruined city streets. This is definitely one to watch.... RPG geeks with XY chromosomes have made "Female Underwear" the third most popular page at the Oblivion mods wiki. Only "BTMod" and "Recommended Mods" top Tamriel's Victoria's Secret, which goes to show that perhaps not as many women are gaming as PR flacks would have you believe.... Fans of the *Cube* movie trilogy should check out Hypercube: Source (mods.moddb.com/7488/hypercube-source). This deathmatch mod is set inside the deadly cube from *Cube 2: Hypercube* and is filled with all sorts of gas, fire, and spike traps. It's a little rough, but the setting is wildly surreal and the style of action unique, owing to the crazy number of traps.... Short adventures for Neverwinter Nights don't get any better than Hugie's The Island (nwvault.ign.com/View.php?view=modules.Detail&id=4912). The module may rest on that hackneyed old premise of being shipwrecked on an apparently deserted island full of surprises (the primary one being that it's not actually deserted), but it is geared for epic characters from level 26-28 and features atmospheric jungle settings that tinge your explorations with dread.

applied game theory BY HENRY JENKINS AND KURT SQUIRE

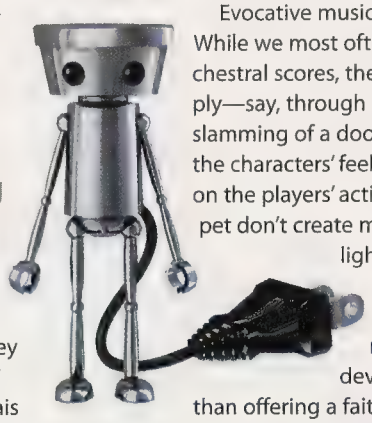
Saving the Family

Chibi Robo and its blueprint for new emotional experiences through gaming

We've saved the world from dragons, terrorists, and evil overlords more times than we can recall, but we'd never saved a family from divorce until we played *Chibi Robo*. In this GameCube game, you're a tiny robot purchased by a father for his daughter's birthday, an event that throws this financially struggling family into chaos. As the father is thrown out of the bedroom and onto the couch, you're tossed into this epic struggle for domestic bliss. Your performance of household chores—and assorted quests—may help save this family.

This may seem like an odd idea for a game. But, as we argued in "A Game That Will Make You Cry," games should begin addressing such topics in order to become a more mature medium and gain broader acceptance. We identified several key melodramatic features, many of which *Chibi Robo* employs to great effect. Scrutinizing this game, with its wonderful mix of cartoon, parody, comedy, and serious emotional matter, one finds the blueprint for new emotional experiences through gaming.

"Given how much innovation Chibi Robo packs into one little robot cleaning game, it's been surprising to see the press's reactions to it."



The most obvious innovation is subject matter. The overarching narrative arcs—redeeming the father, justifying one's existence, communicating with the daughter, cracking the icy exterior of the mother, and finally bringing them all together while fighting off an external enemy—could have been lifted from any "chick flick." This dramatic arc is driven by classic adventure game mechanics, but it's wrapped in an open-ended *cleaning* game, of all things. In fact, the game initially presents itself as a free-form exploration in which you pick up trash and wash stains from carpets in order to make the family happy.

Going deeper, the game deploys stock melodramatic devices to add emotional depth. One simple device is using reactive third parties, characters that bear witness to and are affected by events. In *Chibi Robo*, the daughter, Jenny, reacts to fights between the parents. Her inability to speak (she's been cursed by a frog) represents feelings of hopelessness, and, in between events, she draws pictures of her experiences and how she's feeling. Her drawings add emotional layers (a child's fears) to relatively straightforward events, like two spouses quarrelling. This simple device requires no AI, but it does get players to consider the affective weight of the events. Similarly, a scrapbook records your heroics, bearing witness to your accomplishments, encouraging you to read the episodes through a narrative frame.

In "A Game That Will Make You Cry," we also argued for the importance of emotional crisis points, downtime, and rhythms and cycles of action. *Chibi Robo* uses a day/night cycle that allows for carefully timed emotional crisis points via triggered events, like a fight between the parents. But it also gives a natural rhythm to the day's preparation, activities, and wrap-up (now save). This structure also allows the designer to set up interactions with reactive third parties on days and nights after key events. The point here is not just that designers need to give rhythms to gameplay—which they do—but that they need to map out the emotional trajectory of that gameplay as carefully as they map out its rewards.

Evocative music is a final characteristic of melodrama. While we most often think of this in terms of sweeping orchestral scores, the soundtrack often functions more simply—say, through the emotional quality of a voice or the slamming of a door. *Chibi Robo* uses music to communicate the characters' feelings rather than simply to give feedback on the players' actions. Chibi's feet running across the carpet don't create metallic or even crunching sounds, but the light plucking of piano strings. Chibi's diligent scrubbing of the floor with the toothbrush is accompanied by the melodic strains of Spanish guitar. Such devices shape the player's emotions rather than offering a faithful representation of reality.

Given how much innovation *Chibi Robo* packs into one little robot cleaning game, it's been surprising to see the press's reactions to it. Most are giving it "above average" scores, but, scanning the reviews, one may be surprised at their failure to mention any of these features. Some even knock the game for the very elements mentioned here. The game reviewers' inability to pick up on what *Chibi Robo* is trying to accomplish points to a deeper structural problem in the games industry.

As genres and patterns become more established, game producers, fans, and even critics seem less open to pushing the medium's boundaries. Regardless of whether critics find a game to be perfectly executed, they need to focus attention on games that are actually trying to expand the medium's vocabulary. If we don't begin supporting these experiments, we'll be saddled with nothing but a depressing line-up of sequels, rehashes, and knock-offs. And we'll have only ourselves to blame.

Henry Jenkins and **Kurt Squire** are co-directors of The Education Arcade, which is based at MIT and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. More information on the program can be found at educationarcade.org

In Defense of Inhumanity

"Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it."
—George Bernard Shaw

Despite the occasional *Katamari Damacy*, *Spore*, or *Mary-Kate and Ashley's Mystery Mall*, most games have you playing as a human. Or as a humanoid, e.g., an Elf, Dwarf, Cuotl Sun Idol, or L-shaped *Tetris* piece. This makes sense, since humans make games for humans. Humanity's all we know, and there's no trait more emblematic of us than our consistent resounding disinterest in nonhuman affairs. We find our own banality and self-destructive impulses endlessly captivating.

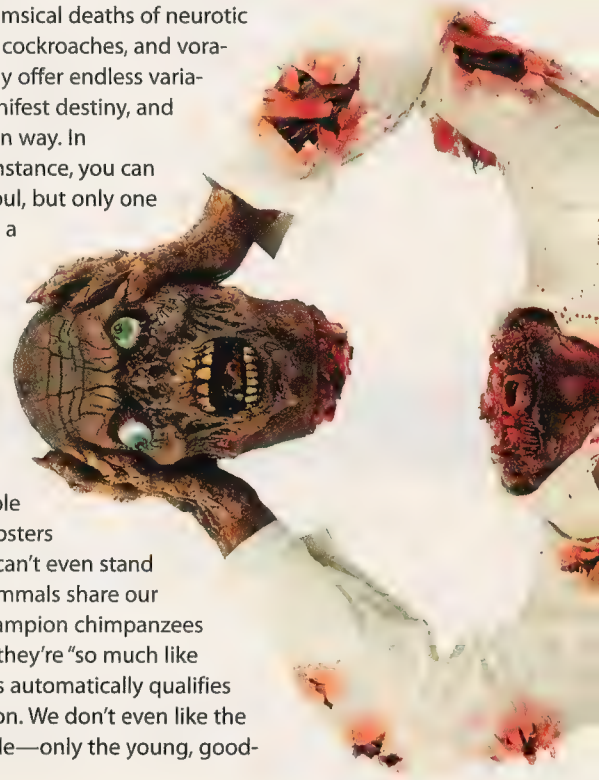
Developers and comic book artists can imagine a flying, invulnerable, altruistic demigod like Superman, but nothing more interesting for him to do than repeatedly jail terrestrial criminals. Superman actually had a planet of his own, but his human creators blew it up because our issues are the only ones that matter; without our sun, he's Robin. Superman's benign, incorruptible, has humanity's best interests at heart, and comes from a more advanced civilization, but there's never been any discussion of putting him in charge.

In fiction, we prefer our heroes to be human, or at least to look human. There's never been a movie or game where humanity was the laughingstock of the Galactic Federation. Even the pursuit of knowledge pretty much starts and stops with human affairs. If they expect to continue getting grant money, artists and scientists with distinguished credentials and proven track records must regularly convince bureaucrats with little artistic or scientific background that their efforts will significantly improve human lives in the short term. Simply adding to our general knowledge of the universe or our own psyches isn't justification enough.

When scientists report findings that run contrary to the party line of those in power, financiers discredit the results (and the scientists). As Joycelyn Elders learned, we can't handle the truth. We particularly can't handle such possible truths as the notion that just maybe we're alone in the universe, or that by chance we happened to be born too soon to have what will someday be a normal lifespan of centuries, the most boring moment of which will outshine our finest one by orders of magnitude. Maybe, as a species, we haven't risen as far above our hominid cousins as our technology suggests. At this early stage of our development, our minds are still too self-absorbed and emotionally frail to acknowledge our denial, preferring the numbing trance generated by our modern cave paintings: TV, movies, and the Web.

Our games, movies, and books have generally tended to reflect and reinforce this ingrained solipsism. People overwhelmingly prefer to read not only about people but about types of people like themselves, only with less boring lives.

For decades, literature and even movies have explored the notion of why we are the silly way we are, sometimes with sophistication. By contrast, games so far aspire to shoot only as high as the dumbest movies. Cutting-edge games that once offered us pioneering, voyeuristic glimpses into the tragic lives and whimsical deaths of neurotic marbles, crime-solving cockroaches, and voracious Pac-Men now only offer endless variations on mankind's manifest destiny, and not in an Olaf Stapledon way. In *World of WarCraft*, for instance, you can play a brain-eating ghoul, but only one who wears clothes, has a bank account, speaks perfect English, and trades jewelry with other races instead of eating their brains.



What's our self-love based on? There's nothing inherently noble about dropping live lobsters into boiling water. We can't even stand the idea that other mammals share our DNA. Animal lovers champion chimpanzees and dolphins because they're "so much like us," as if being unlike us automatically qualifies something for extinction. We don't even like the majority of other people—only the young, good-looking, and affluent. We herd the rest under self-esteem–building banners like national pride, democracy, and school spirit, all to create the comforting illusion of organizing principles in a universe where everyone's genetics and destiny are a crapshoot. Frankly, I feel no particular affiliation toward others of my ethnicity, age, hair color, gender, IQ, weight class, neighborhood, city, state, nation, era, or universe. (I read somewhere, though, that our universe is "flat," which slightly diminishes its chances of colliding with another universe. Better luck next time, round-universe dwellers!)

"In World of WarCraft, you can play a brain-eating ghoul, but only one who wears clothes, has a bank account, and trades jewelry with other races instead of eating their brains."

Being nothing more than victims of chance was a scary thought to our ancestors, too. So, to soothe their nerves, they populated the heavens with temperamental gods and

demons always threatening to destroy the world. That practice persists, long after smog drained the skies of their majesty and millennia since the Promised Land was considered prime real estate. Rather than trying to become better people (and more godlike), most of us consider it ennobling to feign certainty on matters none can verify. If that's not for you, there's always a singing contest or pills made by bumblebees that sound like Antonio Banderas.

Species-wise, we're kind of a mess, an embarrassment; hell, we invented embarrassment. On some level we must know it, too, since we christened all the other planets after gods, but our own we named after dirt, even though most of it's water.

You have to be pretty smart to make even bad games. Arguably, the smartest people in the world are the ones making games, so you'd expect successive generations of games to be more and more smart and daring, scaling the intellectual pinnacle of stimulation and simulation. Instead, we get dungeon after medieval dungeon, bloodless gunfire, and space opera kidvid. RPGs at least strive to pose "moral choices," but it's usually a morality based on arbitrary, half-baked gobbledygook. For instance, where does it say you have to be evil to use force lightning? If you use it as a defibrillator to "shock" someone back to life, do you instantly lose the ability?

Just once, couldn't we actually get to play as something cooler than a hairless chimp who bruises easily? A tarantula or giant squid or haunted space station or Satan or Bigfoot or Cthulhu or the monolith from *2001* or a pterodactyl or a genie or a cancer cell or the Thing or Buddha? Or even all of the above; maybe it's a period piece.

Next month: National "Special Value Month for CGM Readers" is celebrated in grand mal fashion nine months early with more words about less than ever! Read, tear, wipe, 'n' flush!

three finger salute BY TOM CHICK

Once Upon a Time...

The stories so far

It was probably some guy in your office who did the story, which was tacked-on long after you'd established the genre and technology and maybe even artwork. It was probably someone with the word "creative" or "lead" in his title who always wanted to write his own (bad) fantasy novel; someone high enough in the pecking order to get away with squandering a few weeks that should have been used for something useful, like your interface, or documentation, or AI.

Games like *Titan Quest* and *The Godfather* paid supposed experts to do their stories. In *Titan Quest*, Greek creatures called Telkines did terrible things that caused quests in Greece, Egypt, and China. This was gradually explained in a series of slowly scrolling dialogue boxes read aloud by actors earning SAG scale. We skipped those and missed out on the work of the Hollywood screenwriter hired to write them. Not that "Hollywood screenwriter" means anything. "Throw a rock in here, you'll hit one," said Tony Shalhoub's character in *Barton Fink,* about screenwriters. "And do me a favor, Fink. Throw it hard."

Then there are recent games like *Prey* and *Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War* that paid people like me—people who write *about* games, for Pete's sake!—to do their stories. If you played those games, you've got a sense of how well that worked out. In *Prey*, a Native American embraces his heritage during an alien abduction, at which point the aliens mutilate his girlfriend and invade the Cherokee afterlife, making the Native American so mad he drives their spaceship into the sun. *Finis*. *Rise & Fall*'s game-writer written plot was more prosaic, spinning a tale of badly translated Eastern European budgetware proportions.

Even good games have bad stories. *StarCraft* and the *WarCrafts* are just derivative sci-fi/fantasy elevated by gameplay, artwork, and staggering commercial success. It's the same with *Halo*, which had the gall to shop its story around Hollywood as if it were something other than a prop in a wildly successful videogame. Having waded through what-

"Painkiller was clearly built with this story in mind: 'Here's a bunch of cool levels and we saved the best one for last. Finis.'"

ever was supposed to be going on in both *Halos*, as well as having read Alex Garland's script for the *Halo* movie, I can tell you that it's not.

I had high hopes that Valve would continue the fine work in its previous *Half Lives*, in which the developers demonstrated that they understood like no one else that you can't do normal storytelling in a game. Their less-is-plenty approach was working great until the *Episode 1* expansion, which merely lined up a few action sequences to bide Gordon's and Alyx's time. Sometimes less is less.

In *Oblivion*, Patrick Stewart dies in the first five minutes, so the next dozen hours are spent shuffling Sean Bean around while giant flaming vaginas pop open across the landscape. (I know, I know, sometimes a gate to Oblivion is just a gate to Oblivion.) At least, that was the extent of what I could deduce while I was running around playing the B stories, which were far more digestible and hence more interesting. It's why the *Hitman* games work as narratives: Just toss me a loose collection of subplots instead of expecting me to remember some silly overarching plot crammed between long stretches of gameplay.

Painkiller deserves special mention, but not for the silly storyline the publisher shoehorned into it after it was made. The game was clearly built with this story in mind: "Here's a bunch of cool levels and we saved the best one for last. *Finis*."

Probably the most admirable story attempts have come from Irrational, a developer whose games have fit nicely around its narratives more often (*System Shock 2* and the *Freedom Force* games) than not (*Tribes: Vengeance*). Black Isle's *Planescape: Torment* is widely lauded as a game with a great story, but what I mostly remember was the writing, which was very good and very present and very long. You thought there was a lot of reading in *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*? *Alpha Centauri* had great writing that wove a narrative backdrop for the game without pretending to tell a story. As in all the best games, that was your job.

Which is the point, and what I hope you'll remember next time someone comes in with a 500kb Word file featuring the latest plot, related in dialogue peppered with proper nouns. You just give me the game. Nothing personal, but I'd just as soon use it to make my own stories as listen to yours. ■

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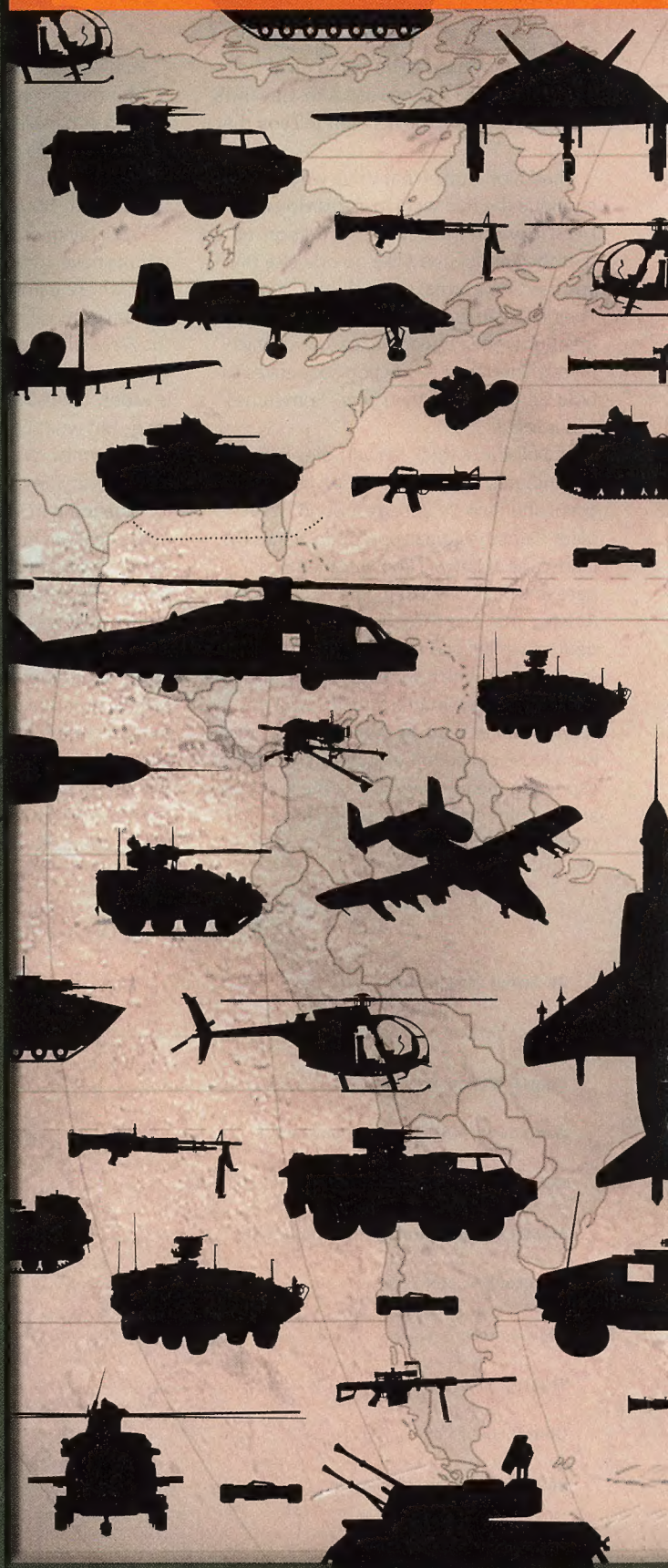

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